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ART. VI. — *The Shadow of Dante, being an Essay towards studying himself, his World, and his Pilgrimage.* By MARIA FRANCESCA ROSSETTI.

Se Dio te lasci, lettor prender frutto
Di tua lezione.

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ON the banks of a little river so shrunken by the suns of summer that it seems fast passing into a tradition, but swollen by the autumnal rains with an Italian suddenness of passion till the massy bridge shudders under the impatient heap of waters behind it, stands a city, which, in its period of bloom not so large as Boston, may well rank next to Athens in the history which teaches *come l' uom s' eterna*.

Originally only a convenient spot in the valley where the fairs of the neighboring Etruscan city of Fiesole were held, it gradually grew from a huddle of booths to a town, and then to a city, which absorbed its ancestral neighbor and became a cradle for the arts, the letters, the science, and the commerce* of modern Europe. For her Cimabue wrought, who infused Byzantine formalism with a suggestion of nature and feeling; for her the Pisani, who divined at least, if they could not conjure with it, the secret of Greek supremacy in sculpture; for her the marvellous boy Ghiberti proved that unity of composition and grace of figure and drapery were never beyond the reach of genius; † for her Brunelleschi curved the dome which Michel Angelo hung in air on St. Peter's; for her Giotto reared the bell-tower graceful as an Horatian ode in marble;

* The Florentines would seem to have invented banks, book-keeping by double-entry, and bills of exchange. The last, by endowing Value with the gift of fern-seed and enabling it to walk invisible, turned the flank of the baronial tariff-system and made the roads safe for the great liberalizer Commerce. This made Money omnipresent, and prepared the way for its present omnipotence. Fortunately it cannot usurp the third attribute of Deity, — omniscience. But whatever the consequences, this Florentine invention was at first nothing but admirable, securing to brain its legitimate advantage over brawn. The latter has begun its revolt, but whether it will succeed better in its attempt to restore mediæval methods than the barons in maintaining them remains to be seen.

† Ghiberti's designs have been criticised by a too systematic æstheticism, as confounding the limits of sculpture and painting. But is not the *rilievo* precisely the bridge by which the one art passes over into the territory of the other?

and the great triumvirate of Italian poetry, good sense, and culture called her mother. There is no modern city about which cluster so many elevating associations, none in which the past is so contemporary with us in unchanged buildings and undisturbed monuments. The house of Dante is still shown; children still receive baptism at the font (*il mio bel San Giovanni*) where he was christened before the acorn dropped that was to grow into a keel for Columbus; and an inscribed stone marks the spot where he used to sit and watch the slow blocks swing up to complete the master-thought of Arnolfo. In the convent of St. Mark hard-by lived and labored Beato Angelico, the saint of Christian art, and Fra Bartolommeo, who taught Raphael dignity. From the same walls Savonarola went forth to his triumphs, short-lived almost as the crackle of his martyrdom. The plain little chamber of Michel Angelo seems still to expect his return; his last sketches lie upon the table, his staff leans in the corner, and his slippers wait before the empty chair. On one of the vine-clad hills, just without the city walls, one's feet may press the same stairs that Milton climbed to visit Galileo. To an American there is something supremely impressive in this cumulative influence of the past full of inspiration and rebuke, something saddening in this repeated proof that moral supremacy is the only one that leaves monuments and not ruins behind it. Time, who with us obliterates the labor and often the names of yesterday, seems here to have spared almost the prints of the *care piante* that shunned the sordid paths of worldly honor.

Around the court-yard of the great Museum of Florence stand statues of her illustrious dead, her poets, painters, sculptors, architects, inventors, and statesmen; and as the traveller feels the ennobling lift of such society, and reads the names or recognizes the features familiar to him as his own threshold, he is startled to find Fame as commonplace here as Notoriety everywhere else, and that this fifth-rate city should have the privilege thus to commemorate so many famous men her sons whose claim to pre-eminence the world would concede. Among them is one before which every scholar, every man who has been touched by the tragedy of life, lingers with reverential pity. The haggard cheeks, the lips clamped together in unfaltering

resolve, the scars of lifelong battle, and the brow whose sharp outline seems the monument of final victory, this, at least is a face that needs no name beneath it. This is he who among literary fames finds only two that for growth and immutability can parallel his own. The suffrages of highest authority would now place him second in that company where he with proud humility took the sixth place.*

The range of Dante's influence is not less remarkable than its intensity. Minds, the antipodes of each other in temper and endowment, alike feel the force of his attraction, the pervasive comfort of his light and warmth. Boccaccio and Lamennais are touched with the same reverential enthusiasm. The imaginative Ruskin calls him "the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral, and intellectual faculties, all at their highest"; and the matter-of-fact Schlosser tells us that "he, who was wont to contemplate earthly life wholly in an earthly light, has made use of Dante, Landino, and Velutello in his solitude to bring a heavenly light into his inward life." Almost all other poets have their seasons, but Dante penetrates to the moral core of those who once fairly come within his sphere, and possesses them wholly. His readers turn students, his students zealots, and what was a taste becomes a religion. The homeless exile finds a home in thousands of grateful hearts. *E venne da esilio in questa pace!*

Every kind of objection, æsthetic and other, may be, and has been, made to the *Divina Commedia*, especially by critics who have but a superficial acquaintance with it, or rather with the *Inferno*, which is as far as most English critics go. Coleridge himself, who had a way of divining what was in books, may be justly suspected of not going further, though with Carey to help him. Mr. Carlyle, who has said admirable things of Dante the man, was very imperfectly read in Dante the author, or he would never have put Sordello in hell and the meeting with Beatrice in paradise. In France it was not much better (though Rivarol has said the best thing hitherto of Dante's parsimony of epithet †) before Ozanam, who, if with de-

* *Inferno*, IV. 102.

† Rivarol characterized only a single quality of Dante's style, who knew how to spend as well as spare. Even the *Inferno*, on which he based his remark,

cided ultramontane leanings, has written excellently well of our poet and after careful study. Voltaire, though not without relentings toward a poet who had put popes heels-upward in hell, regards him on the whole as a stupid monster and barbarian. It was no better in Italy, if we may trust Foscolo, who affirms that "neither Pelli nor others deservedly more celebrated than he ever read attentively the poem of Dante, perhaps never ran through it from the first verse to the last."* Accordingly we have heard that the *Commedia* was a sermon, a political pamphlet, the revengeful satire of a disappointed Ghibelline, nay, worse, of a turncoat Guelph. It is narrow, it is bigoted, it is savage, it is theological, it is mediæval, it is heretical, it is scholastic, it is obscure, it is pedantic, its Italian is not that of *la Crusca*, its ideas are not those of an enlightened eighteenth century, it is everything in short that a poem should not be; and yet, singularly enough, the circle of its charm has widened in proportion as men have receded from the theories of Church and State which are supposed to be its foundation, and as the modes of thought of its author have become more alien to those of his readers. In spite of all objections, some of which are well founded, the *Commedia* remains one of the three or four universal books that have ever been written.

We may admit, with proper limitations, the modern distinction between the Artist and the Moralist. With the one Form is all in all, with the other Tendency. The aim of the one is to delight, of the other to convince. The one is master of his purpose, the other mastered by it. The whole range of perception and thought is valuable to the one as it will minister to imagination, to the other only as it is available for argument. With the moralist use is beauty, good only as it serves an ulterior purpose; with the artist beauty is use, good in and for itself. In the fine arts, the vehicle makes part of the thought, coalesces with it. The living conception shapes itself a body in marble,

might have put him on his guard. Dante understood very well the use of ornament in its fitting place. *Est enim exornatio alicujus convenientis additio*, he tells us in his *De vulgari Eloquentia* (L. ii. c. 2). His simile of the doves (*Inferno*, V. 82, *seqq.*), perhaps the most exquisite in all poetry, quite oversteps Rivarol's narrow limit of "substantive and verb."

* *Discorso sul testo*, ec. § XVIII.

color, or modulated sound, and henceforth the two are inseparable. The results of the moralist pass into the intellectual atmosphere of mankind, it matters little by what mode of conveyance. But where, as in Dante, the religious sentiment and the imagination are both organic, something interfused with the whole being of the man, so that they work in kindly sympathy, the moral will insensibly suffuse itself with beauty as a cloud with light. Then that fine sense of remote analogies, awake to the assonance between facts seemingly remote and unrelated, between the outward and inward worlds, though convinced that the things of this life are shadows, will be persuaded also that they are not fantastic merely, but imply a substance somewhere, and will love to set forth the beauty of the visible image because it suggests the ineffably higher charm of the unseen original. Dante's ideal of life,—the enlightening and strengthening of that native instinct of the soul which leads it to strive backward toward its divine source, may sublimate the senses till each becomes a window for the light of truth and the splendor of God to shine through. In him as in Calderon the perpetual presence of imagination not only glorifies the philosophy of life and the science of theology, but idealizes both in symbols of material beauty. Though Dante's conception of the highest end of man was that he should climb through every phase of human experience to that transcendental and supersensual region where the true, the good, and the beautiful blend in the white light of God, yet the prism of his imagination forever resolved the ray into color again, and he loved to show it also where, entangled and obstructed in matter, it became beautiful once more to the eye of sense. Speculation, he tells us, is the use, without any mixture, of our noblest part (the reason). And this part cannot in this life have its perfect use, which is to behold God (who is the highest object of the intellect), except inasmuch as the intellect considers and beholds him in his effects.* Underlying Dante the metaphysician, statesman, and theologian was always Dante the poet,†

* *Convito*, B. IV. c. 22.

† It is remarkable that when Dante, in 1297, as a preliminary condition to active politics, enrolled himself in the guild of physicians and apothecaries, he is qualified only with the title *poeta*. The arms of the Alighieri (curiously suitable to him who *sovra gli altri come aquila vola*) were a wing of gold in a field of azure. His

irradiating and vivifying, gleaming through in a picturesque phrase, or touching things unexpectedly with that ideal light which softens and subdues like distance in the landscape. The stern outline of his system wavers and melts away before the eye of the reader in a mirage of imagination that lifts from beyond the sphere of vision and hangs in serener air images of infinite suggestion projected from worlds not realized, but substantial to faith, hope, and aspiration. Beyond the horizon of speculation floats, in the passionless splendor of the empyrean, the city of our God, the Rome whereof Christ is a Roman,* the citadel of refuge, even in this life, for souls purified by sorrow and self-denial, transhumanized † to the divine abstraction of pure contemplation. "And it is called Empyrean," he says in his letter to Can Grande, "which is the same as a heaven blazing with fire or ardor, not because there is in it a material fire or burning, but a spiritual one which is blessed love or charity." But this splendor he bodies forth, if sometimes quaintly, yet always vividly and most often in types of winning grace.

Dante was a mystic with a very practical turn of mind. A Platonist by nature, an Aristotelian by training, his feet keep closely to the narrow path of dialectics, because he believed it the safest, while his eyes are fixed on the stars and his brain is busy with things not demonstrable, save by that grace of God which passeth all understanding, nor capable of being told unless by far-off hints and adumbrations. Though he himself has directly explained the scope, the method, and the larger meaning of his greatest work,‡ though he has indirectly pointed out the way to its interpretation in the *Convito*, and though everything he wrote is but an explanatory comment on his own character and opinions, unmistakably clear and precise, yet both man and poem continue not only to be misunderstood popularly, but also by such as should know better.§ That those

vivid sense of beauty even hovers sometimes like a *corposant* over the somewhat stiff lines of his Latin prose. For example, in his letter to the kings and princes of Italy on the coming of Henry VII.: "A new day brightens, revealing the dawn which already scatters the shades of long calamity; already the breezes of morning gather; *the lips of heaven are reddening!*"

* *Purgatorio*, XXXII. 100.

† *Paradiso*, I. 70.

‡ In the letter to Can Grande (XI. of the *Epistolæ*).

§ Witte, Wegele, and Ruth in German, and Ozanam in French, have rendered ignorance of Dante inexcusable among men of culture.

who confined their studies to the *Commedia* should have interpreted it variously is not wonderful, for out of the first or literal meaning others open, one out of another, each of wider circuit and purer abstraction, like Dante's own heavens, giving and receiving light.* Indeed, Dante himself is partly to blame for this. "The form or mode of treatment," he says, "is poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive, and withal definitive, divisive, probative, improbative, and positive of examples." Here are conundrums enough, to be sure! To Italians at home, for whom the great arenas of political and religious speculation were closed, the temptation to find a subtler meaning than the real one was irresistible. Italians in exile, on the other hand, made Dante the stalking-horse from behind which they could take a long shot at Church and State, or at obscurer foes.† Infinitely touching and sacred to us is the instinct of intense sympathy which draws these latter toward their great forerunner, *exul immeritus* like themselves.‡ But they have too often wrung a meaning from Dante which is injurious to the man and out of keeping with the ideas of his age. The aim in expounding a great poem should be, not to discover an endless variety of meanings often contradictory, but whatever it has of great and perennial significance, for such it must have or it would long ago have ceased to be living and operative, would long ago have taken refuge in the Charthouse of great libraries, dumb thenceforth to all mankind. We

* *Inferno*, VII. 75. "Nay, his style," says Miss Rossetti, "is more than concise: it is elliptical, it is recondite. A first thought often lies coiled up and hidden under a second; the words which state the conclusion involve the premises and develop the subject." (p. 3.)

† A complete vocabulary of Italian billingsgate might be selected from Biagioli. Or see the concluding pages of Naunucci's excellent tract *Intorno alle voci usate da Dante*, Corfu, 1840. Even Foscolo could not always refrain. Dante should have taught them to shun such vulgarities. See *Inferno*, XXX. 131–148.

‡ "My Italy, my sweetest Italy, for having loved thee too much I have lost thee, and, perhaps, . . . ah, may God avert the omen! But more proud than sorrowful, for an evil endured for thee alone, I continue to consecrate my vigils to thee alone. . . . An exile full of anguish, perchance, availed to sublime the more in thy Alighieri that lofty soul which was a beautiful gift of thy smiling sky; and an exile equally wearisome and undeserved now avails, perhaps, to sharpen my small genius so that it may penetrate into what he left written for thy instruction and for his glory." Rossetti, *Disamina*, ec. p. 405. Rossetti is himself a proof that a noble mind need not be narrowed by misfortune. His "Comment" (unhappily incomplete) is one of the most valuable and suggestive.

do not mean to say that this minute exegesis is useless or unpraiseworthy, but only that it should be subsidiary to the larger way. It serves to bring out more clearly what is very wonderful in Dante, namely, the omnipresence of his memory throughout the work, so that its intimate coherence does not exist in spite of the reconditeness and complexity of allusion, but is woven out of them. The poem has many senses, he tells us, and there can be no doubt of it, but it has also, and this alone will account for its fascination, a living soul behind them all and informing all, an intense singleness of purpose, a core of doctrine simple, human, and wholesome, though it be also, to use his own phrase, the bread of angels.

Nor is this unity characteristic only of the *Divina Commedia*. All the works of Dante, with the possible exception of the *De vulgari Eloquentia* (which is unfinished), are component parts of a Whole Duty of Man mutually completing and interpreting each other. They are also, as truly as Wordsworth's "Prelude," a history of the growth of a poet's mind. Like the English poet he valued himself at a high rate, the higher no doubt after Fortune had made him outwardly cheap. *Sempre il magnanimo si magnifica in suo cuore; e così lo pusillanimo per contrario sempre si tiene meno che non è.** As in the prose of Milton, whose striking likeness to Dante in certain prominent features of character has been remarked by Foscolo, there are in Dante's minor works continual allusions to himself of great value as material for his biographer. Those who read attentively will discover that the tenderness he shows toward Francesca and her lover did not spring from any friendship for her family, but was a constant quality of his nature, and that what is called his revengeful ferocity is truly the implacable resentment of a lofty mind and a lover of good against evil, whether showing itself in private or public life; perhaps hating the former manifestation of it the most because he believed it to be the root of the latter,—a faith which those who have watched the course of politics in a democracy, as he had, will be inclined to share. His gentleness is all the more striking by contrast, like that silken compensation which blooms out of

* The great-minded man ever magnifies himself in his heart, and in like manner the pusillanimous holds himself less than he is. *Convito*, Tr. I. c. 11.

the thorny stem of the cactus. His moroseness,* his party spirit, and his personal vindictiveness are all predicated upon the *Inferno*, and upon a misapprehension or careless reading even of that. Dante's zeal was not of that sentimental kind, quickly kindled and as soon quenched, that hovers on the surface of shallow minds,

“ Even as the flame of unctuous things is wont
To move upon the outer surface only ” ; †

it was the steady heat of an inward fire heating the whole character of the man through and through, like the minarets of his own city of Dis.‡ He was, as seems, distinctive in some degree of the Latinized races, an unflinching *à priori* logician, not unwilling to “ syllogize invidious verities,” § wherever they might lead him, like Sigier whom he has put in paradise, though more than suspected of heterodoxy. But at the same time, as we shall see, he had something of the practical good sense of that Teutonic stock whence he drew a part of his blood, which prefers a malleable syllogism that can yield without breaking to the inevitable, but incalculable pressure of human nature and the stiffer logic of events. His theory of Church and State was not merely a fantastic one, but intended for the use and benefit of men as they were ; and he allowed accordingly for aberrations, to which even the law of gravitation is forced to give place ; how much more than any scheme whose very starting-point is the freedom of the will !

We are thankful for a commentator at last who passes dryshod over the *turbide orde* of inappreciative criticism, and, quietly waving aside the thick atmosphere which has gathered about the character of Dante both as man and poet, opens for us his City of Doom with the divining-rod of reverential study. Miss Rossetti comes commended to our interest not only as one of a family which seems to hold genius by the tenure of

* Dante's notion of virtue was not that of an ascetic, nor has any one ever painted her in colors more soft and splendid than he in the *Convito*. She is “ sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,” and he dwells on the delights of her love with a rapture which kindles and purifies. So far from making her an inquisitor, he says expressly that she “ should be gladsome and not sullen in all her works.” (*Convito*, Tr. I. c. 8.) “ Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose ” !

† *Inferno*, XIX. 28, 29.

‡ *Inferno*, VIII. 70 – 75.

§ *Paradiso*, X. 138.

gavelkind, but as having a special claim by inheritance to a love and understanding of Dante. She writes English with a purity that has in it something of feminine softness with no lack of vigor or precision. Her lithe mind winds itself with surprising grace through the metaphysical and other intricacies of her subject. She brings to her work the refined enthusiasm of a cultivated woman and the penetration of sympathy. She has chosen the better way (in which Germany took the lead) of interpreting Dante out of himself, the pure spring from which, and from which alone, he drew his inspiration, and not from muddy Fra Alberico or Abbate Giovacchino, from stupid visions of Saint Paul or voyages of Saint Brandan. She has written by far the best comment that has appeared in English, and we should say the best that has been done in England, were it not for her father's *Comento analitico*, for excepting which her filial piety will thank us. Students of Dante in the original will be grateful to her for many suggestive hints, and those who read him in English will find in her volume a travelling map in which the principal points and their connections are clearly set down. In what we shall say of Dante we shall endeavor only to supplement her interpretation with such side-lights as may have been furnished us by twenty years of assiduous study. Dante's thought is multiform, and like certain street signs, once common, presents a different image according to the point of view. Let us consider briefly what was the plan of the *Divina Commedia* and Dante's aim in writing it, which, if not to justify, was at least to illustrate for warning and example the ways of God to man. The higher intention of the poem was to set forth the results of sin, or unwisdom, and of virtue, or wisdom, in this life, and consequently in the life to come, which is but the continuation and fulfilment of this. The scene accordingly is the spiritual world, of which we are as truly denizens now as hereafter. The poem is a diary of the human soul in its journey upwards from error through repentance to atonement with God. To make it apprehensible by those whom it was meant to teach, nay, from its very nature as a poem, and not a treatise of abstract morality, it must set forth everything by means of sensible types and images.

“ To speak thus is adapted to your mind,
 Since only from the sensible it learns
 What makes it worthy of intellect thereafter.
 On this account the Scripture condescends
 Unto your faculties, and feet and hands
 To God attributes, and means something else.” *

Whoever has studied mediæval art in any of its branches need not be told that Dante's age was one that demanded very palpable and even revolting types. As in the old legend, a drop of scalding sweat from the damned soul must shrivel the very skin of those for whom he wrote, to make them wince if not to turn them away from evil-doing. To consider his hell a place of physical torture, is to take Circe's herd for real swine. Its mouth yawns not only under Florence, but before the feet of every man everywhere who goeth about to do evil. His hell is a condition of the soul, and he could not find images loathsome enough to express the moral deformity which is wrought by sin on its victims, or his own abhorrence of it. Its inmates meet you in the street every day.

“ Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
 In one self place ; for where we are is hell,
 And where hell is there we must ever be.” †

It is our own sensual eye that gives evil the appearance of good, and out of a crooked hag makes a bewitching siren. The reason enlightened by the grace of God sees it as it truly is, full of stench and corruption.‡ It is this office of reason which Dante undertakes to perform, by divine commission, in the *Inferno*. There can be no doubt that he looked upon himself as invested with the prophetic function, and the Hebrew forerunners in whose society his soul sought consolation and sustainment certainly set him no example of observing the conventions of good society in dealing with the enemies of God. Indeed his notions of good society were not altogether those of this world in any generation. He would have defined it as meaning “ the peers ” of Philosophy, “ souls free from wretched and vile delights and from vulgar habits, endowed with genius

* *Paradiso*, IV. 40 - 45 (Longfellow's version).

† Marlowe's *Faustus*. “ Which way I fly is hell ; myself am hell.” — *Paradise Lost*, IV. 75. In the same way, *ogni dove in cielo è Paradiso*. — *Paradiso*, III. 88, 89.

‡ *Purgatorio*, XIX. 7 - 33.

and memory.”* Dante himself had precisely this endowment, and in a very surprising degree. His genius enabled him to see and to show what he saw to others; his memory neither forgot nor forgave. Very hateful to his fervid heart and sincere mind would have been the modern theory which deals with sin as involuntary error, and by shifting off the fault to the shoulders of Society, personified for purposes of excuse, but escaping into impersonality again from the grasp of retribution, weakens that sense of personal responsibility which is the root of self-respect and the safeguard of character. Dante indeed saw clearly enough that the Divine justice did at length overtake Society in the ruin of States caused by the corruption of private, and thence of civic, morals; but a personality so intense as his could not be satisfied with such a tardy and generalized penalty as this. “It is Thou,” he says sternly, “who hast done this thing, and Thou, not Society, shalt be damned for it; nay, damned all the worse for this paltry subterfuge. This is not my judgment, but that of universal Nature † from before the beginning of the world.” ‡ Accordingly the highest reason typified in his guide Virgil rebukes him for bringing compassion to the judgments of God, § and again embraces him and calls the mother that bore him blessed, when he bids Filippo Argenti begone among the other dogs. || This latter case shocks our modern feelings the more rudely for the simple pathos with which Dante makes Argenti answer when asked who he was, “Thou seest I am one that weep.” It is also the one that makes most strongly for the theory of Dante’s per-

* *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 16.

† *La natura universale, cioè Iddio. Convito*, Tr. III. c. 4.

‡ *Inferno*, III. 7, 8.

§ *Inferno*, XX. 30. Mr. W. M. Rossetti strangely enough renders this verse “Who hath a passion for God’s judgship.” *Compassion porta* is the reading of the best texts, and Witte adopts it. Buti’s comment is “*cioè porta pena e dolore di colui che giustamente è condannato da Dio che è sempre giusto.*” There is an analogous passage in “The Revelation of the Apostle Paul,” printed in the “Proceedings of the American Oriental Society” (Vol. VIII. pp. 213, 214). “And the angel answered and said, ‘Wherefore dost thou weep? Why! art thou more merciful than God?’ And I said, ‘God forbid, O my lord; for God is good and long-suffering unto the sons of men, and he leaves every one of them to his own will, and he walks as he pleases.’” This is precisely Dante’s view.

|| *Inferno*, VIII. 40.

sonal vindictiveness,* and it may count for what it is worth. We are not greatly concerned to defend him on that score, for he believed in the righteous use of anger, and that baseness was its legitimate quarry. He did not think the Tweeds and Fisks, the political wire-pullers and convention-packers, of his day merely amusing, and he certainly did think it the duty of an upright and thoroughly-trained citizen to speak out severely and unmistakably. He believed firmly, almost fiercely, in a divine order of the universe, a conception whereof had been vouchsafed him, and that whatever and whoever hindered or jostled it, whether wilfully or blindly it mattered not, was to be got out of the way at all hazards; because obedience to God's law, and not making things generally comfortable, was the highest duty of man, as it was also his only way to true felicity. It has been commonly assumed that Dante was a man soured by undeserved misfortune, that he took up a wholly new outfit of political opinions with his fallen fortunes, and that his theory of life and of man's relations to it was altogether reshaped for him by the bitter musings of his exile. This would be singular, to say the least, in a man who tells us that he "felt himself indeed four-square against the strokes of chance," and whose convictions were so intimate that they were not merely intellectual conclusions, but parts of his moral being. Fortunately we are called on to believe nothing of the kind. Dante himself has supplied us with hints and dates which enable us to watch the germination and trace the growth of his double theory of government, applicable to man as he is a citizen of this world, and as he hopes to become hereafter a freeman of the celestial city. It would be of little consequence to show in which of two equally selfish and short-sighted parties a man enrolled himself six hundred years ago, but it is worth something to know that a man of ambitious temper and violent passions, aspiring to office in a city of factions, could rise to a level of principle so far above them all. Dante's opinions have

* "I following her (Moral Philosophy) in the work as well as the passion, so far as I could, abominated and disparaged the errors of men, not to the infamy and shame of the erring, but of the errors." — *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 1. "Wherefore in my judgment as he who defames a worthy man ought to be avoided by people and not listened to, so a vile man descended of worthy ancestors ought to be hunted out by all." — *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 29.

life in them still, because they were drawn from living sources of reflection and experience, because they were reasoned out from the astronomic laws of history and ethics, and were not weather-guesses snatched in a glance at the doubtful political sky of the hour.

Swiftly the politic goes: is it dark? he borrows a lantern;

Slowly the statesman and sure, guiding his feet by the stars.

It will be well, then, to clear up the chronology of Dante's thought. When his ancestor Cacciaguida prophesies to him the life which is to be his after 1300,* he says, speaking of his exile:—

“And that which most shall weigh upon thy shoulders
Will be the bad and foolish company
With which into this valley thou shalt fall;

Of their bestiality their own proceedings
Shall furnish proof; *so 't will be well for thee*
A party to have made thee by thyself.”

Here both context and grammatical construction (infallible guides in a writer so scrupulous and exact) imply irresistibly that Dante had become a party by himself before his exile. The measure adopted by the Priors of Florence while he was one of them (with his assent and probably by his counsel), of sending to the frontier the leading men of both factions, confirms this implication. Among the persons thus removed from the opportunity of doing mischief was his dearest friend Guido Cavalcanti, to whom he had not long before addressed the *Vita Nuova*.† Dante evidently looked back with satisfaction on his conduct at this time and thought it both honest and patriotic, as it certainly was disinterested. “We whose country is the world, as the ocean to the fish,” he tells us, “though we drank of the Arno in infancy, and love Florence so much, that, *because we loved her, we suffer exile unjustly*, support the shoulders of our judgment rather upon reason than the senses.”‡ And again, speaking of old age, he says, “And

* *Paradiso*, XVII. 61–69.

† It is worth mentioning that the sufferers in his *Inferno* are in like manner pretty exactly divided between the two parties. This is answer enough to the charge of partiality. He even puts persons there for whom he felt affection (as Brunetto Latini) and respect (as Farinata degli Uberti and Frederick II.). Till the French looked-up their MSS. it was taken for granted that the *beccajo di Parigi* (*Purgatorio*, XX. 52) was a drop of Dante's gall.

‡ *De vulgari Eloquentia*, L. I. c. 6. Cf. *Inferno*, XV. 61–64.

the noble soul at this age blesses also the times past, and well may bless them, because, revolving them in memory, she recalls her righteous conduct, without which she could not enter the port to which she draws nigh, with so much riches and so great gain." This language is not that of a man who regrets some former action as mistaken, still less of one who repented it for any disastrous consequences to himself. So in justifying a man for speaking of himself, he alleges two examples,—that of Boethius, who did so to "clear himself of the perpetual infamy of his exile"; and that of Augustine, "for, by the process of his life, which was from bad to good, from good to better, and from better to best, he gave us example and teaching."* After middle life, at least, Dante had that wisdom "whose use brings with it marvellous beauties, that is, contentment with every condition of time, and contempt of those things which others make their masters."† If Dante, moreover, wrote his treatise *De Monarchia* before 1302, and we think Witte's inference,‡ from its style and from the fact that he nowhere alludes to his banishment in it, conclusive on this point, then he was already a Ghibelline in the same larger and unpartisan sense which ever after distinguished him from his Italian contemporaries.

"Let, let the Ghibellines ply their handicraft
Beneath some other standard; for this ever
Ill follows he who it and justice parts,"

he makes Justinian say, speaking of the Roman eagle.§ His Ghibellinism, though undoubtedly the result of what he had seen of Italian misgovernment, embraced in its theoretical application the civilized world. His political system was one which his reason adopted, not for any temporary expediency, but because it conduced to justice, peace, and civilization, the three conditions on which alone freedom was possible in any sense which made it worth having. Dante was intensely Italian, nay, intensely Florentine, but on all great questions he was by the logical structure of his mind and its philosophic

* *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 28. *Ib.*, Tr. I. c. 2.

† *Convito*, Tr. III., c. 13.

‡ *Opp. Min. ed. Fraticelli*, Vol. II. pp. 281 and 283. Witte is inclined to put it even earlier than 1300, and we believe he is right.

§ *Paradiso*, VI. 103–105.

impartiality incapable of intellectual provincialism.* If the circle of his affections, as with persistent natures commonly, was narrow, his thought swept a broad horizon from that tower of absolute self which he had reared for its speculation. Even upon the principles of poetry, mechanical and other,† he had reflected more profoundly than most of those who criticise his work, and it was not by chance that he discovered the secret of that magical word too few, which not only distinguishes his verse from all other, but so strikingly from his own prose. He never took the bridle of art ‡ between his teeth where only poetry, and not doctrine, was concerned.

If Dante's philosophy on the one hand was practical, a guide for the conduct of life, it was on the other a much more transcendent thing, whose body was wisdom, her soul love, and her efficient cause truth. It is a practice of wisdom from the mere love of it, for so we must interpret his *amoroso uso di sapienzia*, when we remember how he has said before § that "the love of wisdom for its delight or profit is not true love of wisdom." And this love must embrace knowledge in all its branches, for Dante is content with nothing less than a pan-cratic training, and has a scorn of *dilettanti*, specialists, and quacks. "Wherefore none ought to be called a true philosopher who for any delight loves any part of knowledge, as there are

* Some Florentines have amusingly enough doubted the genuineness of the *De vulgari Eloquio*, because Dante therein denies the pre-eminence of the Tuscan dialect.

† See particularly the second book of the *De vulgari Eloquio*.

‡ *Purgatorio*, XXXIII. 141. "That thing one calls beautiful whose parts answer to each other, because pleasure results from their harmony." — *Convito*, Tr. I. c. 5. Carlyle says that "he knew too, partly, that his work was great, the greatest a man could do." He knew it fully. Telling us how Giotto's fame as a painter had eclipsed that of Cimabue, he takes an example from poetry also, and selecting two Italian poets, one the most famous of his predecessors, the other of his contemporaries, calmly sets himself above them both (*Purgatorio*, XI. 97-99), and gives the reason for his supremacy. (*Purgatorio*, XXIV. 49-62.) It is to be remembered that *Amore* in the latter passage does not mean love in the ordinary sense, but in that transcendental one set forth in the *Convito*, — that state of the soul which opens it for the descent of God's spirit, to make it over into his own image. "Therefore it is manifest that in this love the Divine virtue descends into men in the guise of an angel, . . . and it is to be noted that the descending of the virtue of one thing into another is nothing else than reducing it to its own likeness." — *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 14.

§ *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 11. *Ib.*, Tr. I. c. 11.

many who delight in composing *Canzoni*, and delight to be studious in them, and who delight to be studious in rhetoric and in music, and flee and abandon the other sciences which are all members of wisdom.”* “Many love better to be held masters than to be so.” With him wisdom is the generalization from many several knowledges of small account by themselves, results therefore from breadth of culture, and would be impossible without it. Philosophy is a noble lady (*donna gentil* †), partaking of the divine essence by a kind of eternal marriage, while with other intelligences she is united in a less measure “as a mistress of whom no lover takes complete joy.” ‡ The eyes of this lady are her demonstrations, and her smile is her persuasion. “The eyes of wisdom are her demonstrations by which truth is beheld most certainly; and her smile is her persuasions in which the interior light of wisdom is shown under a certain veil, and in these two is felt that highest pleasure of beatitude which is the greatest good in paradise.” § “It is to be known that the beholding this lady was so largely ordained for us not merely to look upon the face which she shows us, but that we may desire to attain the things which she keeps concealed. And as through her much thereof is

* *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 12 – 15.

† *Inferno*, II. 94, the *donna gentil* is Lucia, the pre-venient Grace, the light of God which shows the right path and guides the feet in it. With Dante God is always the sun, “which leadeth others right by every road.” — *Inferno*, I. 18. “The spiritual and unintelligible Sun, which is God.” — *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 12. His light “enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world,” but his dwelling is in the heavens. He who wilfully deprives himself of this light is spiritually dead in sin. So when in Mars he beholds the glorified spirits of the martyrs he exclaims, “O Elios, who so arrayest them!” — *Paradiso*, XIV. 96. Blanc (*Vocabolario, sub voce*) rejects this interpretation. But Dante, entering the abode of the Blessed, invokes the “good Apollo,” and shortly after calls him *divina virtù*. We shall have more to say of this hereafter.

‡ *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 12.

§ *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 15. Recalling how the eyes of Beatrice lift her servant through the heavenly spheres, and that smile of hers so often dwelt on with rapture, we see how Dante was in the habit of commenting and illustrating his own works. We must remember always that with him the allegorical exposition is the true one (*Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 1), the allegory being a truth which is hidden under a beautiful falsehood (*Convito*, Tr. II. c. 1), and that Dante thought his poems without this exposition “under some shade of obscurity, so that to many their beauty was more grateful than their goodness” (*Convito*, Tr. I. c. 1), “because the goodness is in the meaning, and the beauty in the ornament of the words.” — *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 12.

seen by reason, so by her we believe that every miracle may have its reason in a higher intellect, and consequently may be. Whence our good faith has its origin, whence comes the hope of those unseen things which we desire, and through that the operation of charity, by the which three virtues we rise to philosophize in that celestial Athens where the Stoics, Peripatetics, and Epicureans through the art of eternal truth accordingly concur in one will.” *

As to the double scope of Dante's philosophy we will cite a passage from the *Convito*, all the more to our purpose as it will illustrate his own method of allegorizing. “ Verily the use of our mind is double, that is, practical and speculative, the one and the other most delightful, although that of contemplation be the more so. That of the practical is for us to act virtuously, that is, honorably, with prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. [These are the four stars seen by Dante, *Purg.*, I. 22–27.] That of the speculative is not to act for ourselves, but to consider the works of God and nature. . . . Verily of these uses one is more full of beatitude than the other, as it is the speculative, which without any admixture is the use of our noblest part. . . . And this part in this life cannot have its use perfectly, which is to see God, except inasmuch as the intellect considers him and beholds him through his effects. And that we should seek this beatitude as the highest, and not the other, the Gospel of Mark teaches us if we will look well. Mark says that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Mary Salome went to find the Saviour at the tomb and found him not, but found a youth clad in white who said to them, ‘ Ye seek the Saviour, and I say unto you that he is not here ; and yet fear ye not, but go and say unto his disciples and Peter that he will go before them into Galilee, and there ye shall see him even as he told you.’ By these three women may be understood the three sects of the active life, that is, the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Peripatetics, who go to the tomb, that is, to the present life, which is a receptacle of things corruptible, and seek the Saviour, that is, beatitude, and find him not, but they find a youth in white raiment, who, according to the testimony of Matthew and the rest, was an

* *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 14.

angel of God. This angel is that nobleness of ours which comes from God, as hath been said, which speaks in our reason and says to each of these sects, that is, to whoever goes seeking beatitude in this life, that it is not here, but go and say to the disciples and to Peter, that is, to those who go seeking it and those who are gone astray (like Peter who had denied), that it will go before them into Galilee, that is, into speculation. Galilee is as much as to say Whiteness. Whiteness is a body full of corporeal light more than any other, and so contemplation is fuller of spiritual light than anything else here below. And he says, 'it will go before,' and does not say, 'it will be with you,' to give us to understand that God always goes before our contemplation, nor can we ever overtake here Him who is our supreme beatitude. And it is said, 'There ye shall see him as he told you,' that is, here ye shall have of his sweetness, that is, felicity, as is promised you here, that is, as it is ordained that ye can have. And thus it appears that we find our beatitude, this felicity of which we are speaking, first imperfect in the active life, that is, in the operations of the moral virtues, and afterwards wellnigh perfect in the operation of the intellectual ones, the which two operations are speedy and most direct ways to lead to the supreme beatitude, the which cannot be had here, as appears by what has been said." *

At first sight there may seem to be some want of agreement in what Dante says here of the soul's incapacity of the vision of God in this life with the triumphant conclusion of his own poem, the most truly sublime flight in all poetry. But here as elsewhere Dante must be completed and explained by himself. "We must know that everything most greatly desires its own perfection, and in that its every desire is appeased, and by that everything is desired. [That is, the one is drawn toward, the other draws.] And this is that desire which makes every delight maimed, for no delight is so great in this life that it can take away from the soul this thirst so that desire remain not in the thought." † "And since it is most natural to wish to be in God, the human soul naturally wills it with all longing. And since its being depends on God and is preserved there

* *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 22.

† *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 6.

by, it naturally desires and wills to be united with God in order to fortify its being. And since in the goodnesses of human nature is shown some reason for those of the Divine, it follows that the human soul unites itself in a spiritual way with those so much the more strongly and quickly as they appear more perfect, and this appearance happens according as the knowledge of the soul is clear or impeded. And this union is what we call Love, whereby may be known what is within the soul, seeing those it outwardly loves. . . . And the human soul which is ennobled with the ultimate potency, that is, reason, participates in the Divine nature after the manner of an eternal Intelligence, because the soul is so ennobled and denuded of matter in that sovran potency that the Divine light shines in it as in an angel.”* This union with God may therefore take place before the warfare of life is over, but is only possible for souls *perfettamente naturati*, perfectly endowed by nature.† This depends on the virtue of the generating soul and the concordant influence of the planets. “And if it happen that through the purity of the recipient soul, the intellectual virtue be well abstracted and absolved from every corporeal shadow, the Divine bounty is multiplied in it as in a thing sufficient to receive the same.”‡ “And there are some who believe that if all the aforesaid virtues [powers] should unite for the production of a soul in their best disposition, so much of the Deity would descend into it that it would be almost another incarnate God.”§ Did Dante believe himself to be one of these? He certainly gives us reason to think so. He was born under fortunate stars as he twice tells us,|| and he puts the middle of his own life at the thirty-fifth year, which is the period he assigns for it in the diviner sort of men.¶

* *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 2. By *potenzia* and *potenza* Dante means the faculty of receiving influences or impressions. (*Paradiso*, XIII. 61; XXIX. 34.) Reason is the “sovran potency” because it makes us capable of God.

† “O thou *well-born*, unto whom Grace concedes
To see the thrones of the Eternal triumph,
Or ever yet the warfare be abandoned.” — *Paradiso*, V. 115 – 118.

‡ *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 21.

§ *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 7.

|| *Inferno*, XV. 55, 56; *Paradiso*, XXII. 112 – 117.

¶ *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 23 (cf. *Inferno*, I. 1).

The stages of Dante's intellectual and moral growth may, we think, be reckoned with some approach to exactness from data supplied by himself. In the poems of the *Vita Nuova*, Beatrice, until her death, was to him simply a poetical ideal, a type of abstract beauty, chosen according to the fashion of the day after the manner of the Provençal poets, but in a less carnal sense than theirs. "And by the fourth nature of animals, that is, the sensitive, man has another love whereby he loves according to sensible appearance, even as a beast. . . . And by the fifth and final nature, that is, the truly human, or, to speak better, angelic, that is, rational, man has a love for truth and virtue. . . . Wherefore, since this nature is called *mind*, I said that love discoursed in my mind to make it understood that this love was that which is born in that noblest of natures, that is, [the love] of truth and virtue, and *to shut out every false opinion by which it might be suspected that my love was for the delight of sense.*" * This is a very weighty affirmation, made, as it is, so deliberately by a man of Dante's veracity, who would and did speak truth at every hazard. Let us dismiss at once and forever all the idle tales of Dante's amours, of la Montanina, Gentucca, Pietra, Lisetta, and the rest, to that outer darkness of impure thoughts *là onde la stoltezza dipartille*.† We think Miss Rossetti a little hasty in allowing that in

* *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 3; *Paradiso*, XVIII. 108-130.

† See an excellent discussion and elucidation of this matter by Witte, who so highly deserves the gratitude of all students of Dante, in *Dante Alighieri's Lyrische Gedichte*, Theil II. pp. 48-57. It was kindly old Boccaccio, who, without thinking any harm, first set this nonsense agoing. His "Life of Dante" is mainly a rhetorical exercise. After making Dante's marriage an excuse for revamping all the old slanders against matrimony, he adds gravely, "Certainly I do not affirm these things to have happened to Dante, for I do not know it, though it be true that (whether things like these or others were the cause of it), once parted from her, he would never come where she was nor suffer her to come where he was, for all that she was the mother of several children by him." That he did not come to her is not wonderful, for he would have been burned alive if he had. Dante could not send for her because he was a homeless wanderer. She remained in Florence with her children because she had powerful relations and perhaps property there. It is plain, also, that what Boccaccio says of Dante's *lussuria* had no better foundation. It gave him a chance to turn a period. He gives no particulars, and his general statement is simply incredible. Lionardo Bruni and Vellutello long ago pointed out the trifling and fictitious character of this "Life." Those familiar with Dante's allegorical diction will not lay much stress on the literal meaning of *pargoletta* in *Purgatorio*, XXXI. 59. Gentucca, of course, was a real person, one of those who

the years which immediately followed Beatrice's death Dante gave himself up "more or less to sensual gratification and earthly aim." The earthly aim we in a certain sense admit; the sensual gratification we reject as utterly inconsistent not only with Dante's principles but with his character and indefatigable industry. Miss Rossetti illustrates her position by a subtle remark on "the lulling spell of an intellectual and sensitive delight in good running parallel with a voluntary and actual indulgence in evil." The dead Beatrice beckoned him toward the life of contemplation, and it was precisely during this period that he attempted to find happiness in the life of action. "Verily it is to be known that we may in this life have two felicities, following two ways, good and best, which lead us thither. The one is the active, the other the contemplative life, the which (though by the active we may attain, as has been said, unto good felicity) leads us to the best felicity and blessedness."* "The life of my heart, that is, of my inward self, was wont to be a sweet thought which went many times to the feet of God, that is to say, in thought I contemplated the kingdom of the Blessed. And I tell the final cause why I mounted thither in thought when I say, 'Where it [the sweet thought] beheld a lady in glory,' that I might make it understood that I was and am certain, by *her gracious revelation, that she was in heaven*, [not on earth, as I had vainly imagined,] whither I went in thought, so often as was possible to me, as it were rapt."† This passage exactly answers to another in *Purgatorio*, XXX. 115-138:—

"Not only by the work of those great wheels
That destine every seed unto some end,
According as the stars are in conjunction,
But by the largess of celestial graces,

Such had this man become in his New Life
Potentially, that every righteous habit
Would have made admirable proof in him;

had shown hospitality to the exile. Dante remembers them all somewhere, for gratitude (which is quite as rare as genius) was one of the virtues of his unforgetting nature. Boccaccio's *Comment* is later and far more valuable than the *Life*.

* *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 17; *Purgatorio*, XXVII. 100-108.

† *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 8.

Some time I did sustain him with my look ; (*volto*)
 Revealing unto him my youthful eyes,
 I led him with me turned in the right way.
 As soon as ever of my second age
 I was upon the threshold and changed life,
 Himself from me he took and gave to others.
 When from the flesh to spirit I ascended,
 And beauty and virtue were in me increased,
 I was to him less dear and less delightful,
 And into ways untrue he turned his steps,
 Pursuing the false images of good
 That never any promises fulfil (i. e. *wholly fulfil, rendono intera*).
 Nor prayer for inspiration me availed,*
By means of which in dreams and otherwise
I called him back, so little did he heed them.
 So low he fell, that all appliances
 For his salvation were already short
 Save showing him the people of perdition."

Now Dante himself, we think, gives us the clew, by following which we may reconcile the contradiction, what Miss Rossetti calls "the astounding discrepancy," between the Lady of the *Vita Nuova* who made him unfaithful to Beatrice, and the same Lady in the *Convito*, who in attributes is identical with Beatrice herself. We must remember that the prose part of the *Convito*, which is a comment on the *Canzoni*, was written after the *Canzoni* themselves. How long after we cannot say with certainty, but it was plainly composed at intervals, a part of it probably after Dante had entered upon old age (which began, as he tells us, with the forty-fifth year), consequently after 1310. Dante had then written a considerable part of the *Divina Commedia* in which Beatrice was to go through her final and most ethereal transformation in his mind and memory. We say in his memory, for such idealizations have a very subtle retrospective action, and the new condition of feeling or thought is uneasy till it has half unconsciously brought into harmony whatever is inconsistent with it in the past. The inward life unwillingly admits any break in its con-

* We should prefer here,

"Nor inspirations won by prayer availed,"

as better expressing *Nè l'impetrare spirazion*. Mr. Longfellow's translation is so admirable for its exactness as well as its beauty that it may be thankful for the minutest criticism, such only being possible.

tinuity, and nothing is more common than to hear a man, in venting an opinion taken up a week ago, say with perfect sincerity, "I have always thought so and so." Whatever belief occupies the whole mind soon produces the impression on us of having long had possession of it, and one mode of consciousness blends so insensibly with another that it is impossible to mark by an exact line where one begins and the other ends. Dante in his exposition of the *Canzoni* must have been subject to this subtlest and most deceitful of influences. He would try to reconcile so far as he conscientiously could his present with his past. This he could do by means of the allegorical interpretation. "For it would be a great shame to him," he says in the *Vita Nuova*, "who should poetize something under the vesture of some figure or rhetorical color, and afterwards, when asked, could not strip his words of that vesture in such wise that they should have a true meaning." Now in the literal exposition of the *Canzone* beginning, "Voi che intendendo il terzo ciel movete,"* he tells us that the *grandezza* of the *Donna Gentil* was "temporal greatness" (one certainly of the felicities attainable by way of the *vita attiva*), and immediately after gives us a hint by which we may comprehend why a proud † man might covet it. "How much wisdom and how great a persistence in virtue (*abito virtuoso*) are hidden for want of this lustre!" ‡ When Dante reaches the Terrestrial Paradise (*Purgatorio*, XXVIII.), which is the highest felicity of this world, and therefore the consummation of the Active Life, he is welcomed by a Lady who is its symbol,

"Who went along

Singing and culling floweret after floweret,"

and warming herself in the rays of Love, or "actual speculation," that is, "where love makes its peace felt."§ That she was the symbol of this is evident from the previous dream of Dante (*Purgatorio*, XXVII. 94-105), in which he sees Leah, the universally accepted type of it,

* Which he cites in the *Paradiso*, VIII. 37.

† Dante confesses his guiltiness of the sin of pride, which (as appears by the examples he gives of it) included ambition, in *Purgatorio*, XIII. 136, 137.

‡ *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 11.

§ *Purgatorio*, XXVIII. 40-44; *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 13.

“ Walking in a meadow,
Gathering flowers ; and singing she was saying,
‘ Know whosoever may my name demand
That I am Leah, who go moving round
My beauteous hands to make myself a garland,’ ”

that is to say, of good works. She, having “washed him thoroughly from sin,” *

“ All dripping brought
Into the dance of the four beautiful,” †

who are the intellectual virtues Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude, the four stars, guides of the Practical Life, which he had seen when he came out of the Hell where he had beheld the results of sin, and arrived at the foot of the Mount of Purification. That these were the special virtues of practical goodness Dante had already told us in a passage before quoted from the *Convito*.‡ That this was Dante’s meaning is confirmed by what Beatrice says to him (*Purgatorio*, 100 – 102),

“ Short while shalt thou be here a forester (*silvano*)
And thou shalt be with me forevermore
A citizen of that Rome where Christ is Roman ”;

for by a “forest” he always means the world of life and action.§ At the time when Dante was writing the *Canzoni* on which the *Convito* was a comment, he believed science to be the “ultimate perfection itself, and not the way to it,” || but before the *Convito* was composed he had become aware of a higher and purer light, an inward light, in that Beatrice, already clarified wellnigh to a mere image of the mind, “who lives in heaven with the angels, and on earth with my soul.” ¶

So spiritually does Dante always present Beatrice to us, even where most corporeal, as in the *Vita Nuova*, that many, like

* Psalm li. 2. “And therefore I say that her [Philosophy’s] beauty, that is, morality, rains flames of fire, that is, a righteous appetite which is generated in the love of moral doctrine, the which appetite removes us from the natural as well as other vices.” — *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 15.

† *Purgatorio*, XXXI. 103, 104.

‡ Tr. IV. c. 22.

§ Such is the *selva oscura* (*Inferno*, I. 2), such the *selva erronea di questa vita* (*Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 24).

|| *Convito*, Tr. I. c. 13.

¶ *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 2.

Biscione and Rossetti, have doubted her real existence. But surely we must consent to believe that she who speaks of

“ The fair limbs wherein
I was enclosed, which scattered are in earth,”

was once a creature of flesh and blood, —

“ A creature not too bright and good
For human nature's daily food.”

When she died, Dante's grief, like that of Constance, filled her room up with something fairer than the reality had ever been. There is no idealizer like unavailing regret, all the more if it be a regret of fancy as much as of real feeling. She early began to undergo that change into something rich and strange in the sea* of his mind which so completely supernaturalized her at last. It is not impossible, we think, to follow the process of transformation. During the period of the *Convito Canzoni*, when he had so given himself to study that to his weakened eyes “ the stars were shadowed with a white blur,” † this star of his imagination was eclipsed for a time with the rest. As his love had never been of the senses (which is bestial ‡), so his sorrow was all the more ready to be irradiated with celestial light, and to assume her to be the transmitter of it who had first awakened in him the nobler impulses of his nature,

(“ Such had this man become in his New Life
Potentially,”)

and given him the first hints of a higher, nay, of the highest, good. With that turn for double meaning and abstraction which was so strong in him, her very name helped him to allegorize her into one who makes blessed (*beat*), and thence the step was a short one to personify in her that Theosophy which enables man to see God and to be mystically united with him even in the flesh. Already, in the *Vita Nuova*, § she appears to him as afterwards in the Terrestrial Paradise, clad in that color of flame which belongs to the seraphim who

* *Mar di tutto il senno*, he calls Virgil (*Inferno*, VIII. 7). Those familiar with his own works will think the phrase singularly applicable to himself.

† *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 9.

‡ *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 3.

§ *Vita Nuova*, XI.

contemplate God in himself, simply, and not in his relation to the Son or the Holy Spirit.* When misfortune came upon him, when his schemes of worldly activity failed, and science was helpless to console, as it had never been able wholly to satisfy, she already rose before him as the lost ideal of his youth, reproaching him with his desertion of purely spiritual aims. It is, perhaps, in allusion to this that he fixes the date of her death with such minute precision on the 9th June, 1390, most probably his own twenty-fifth birthday, on which he passed the boundary of adolescence.†

That there would seem to be a discrepancy between the Lady of the *Vita Nuova* and her of the *Convito*, Dante himself was already aware when writing the former and commenting it. Explaining the sonnet beginning *Gentil pensier*, he says, "In this sonnet I make two parts of myself according as my thoughts were divided in two. The one part I call *heart*, that is, the appetite, the other *soul*, that is, reason. . . . It is true that in the preceding sonnet I take side with the heart against the eyes [which were weeping for the lost Beatrice], and that appears contrary to what I say in the present one; and therefore I say that in that sonnet also I mean by *heart* the appetite, because my desire to remember me of my most gentle Lady was still greater than to behold this one, albeit I had already some appetite for her, but slight as should seem: whence it appears that the one saying is not contrary to the other."‡ When, therefore, Dante speaks of the love of this Lady as the "adversary of *Reason*," he uses the word in its highest sense, not as understanding (*Intellectus*), but as synonymous with *soul*. Already, when the latter part of the *Vita Nuova*, nay, perhaps the whole of the explanatory portion of it, was written, the plan of the *Commedia* was complete, a poem the higher aim of which was to keep the soul alive both in this world and for the next. As Dante tells us, the contradiction in his mind was,

* *Vita Nuova*, Tr. II. c. 6.

† *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 24. The date of Dante's birth is uncertain, but the period he assigns for it (*Paradiso*, XXII. 112-117) extends from the middle of May to the middle of June. If we understand Buti's astrological comment, the day would fall in June rather than May.

‡ *Vita Nuova*, XXXIX. Compare for a different view, "The New Life of Dante, an Essay with Translations," by C. E. Norton, pp. 92 *seqq.*

though he did not become aware of it till afterwards, more apparent than real. He sought consolation in study, and failing to find it in Learning (*scienza*), he was led to seek it in Wisdom (*sapienza*), which is the love of God and the knowledge of him.* He had sought happiness, through the understanding; he was to find it through intuition. The lady Philosophy (according as she is moral or intellectual) includes both. Her gradual transfiguration is exemplified in passages already quoted (*ante*, pp. 154, 155). The active life leads indirectly by a knowledge of its failures and sins (*Inferno*), or directly by a righteous employment of it (*Purgatorio*), to the same end. The use of the sciences is to induce in us the ultimate perfection, that of speculating upon truth; the use of the highest of them, theology, the contemplation of God.† To this they all lead up. In one of those curious chapters of the *Convito*,‡ where he points out the analogy between the sciences and the heavens, Dante tells us that he compares moral philosophy with the crystalline heaven or *Primum Mobile*, because it communicates life and gives motion to all the others below it.

* There is a passage in the *Convito* (Tr. III. c. 15) in which Dante seems clearly to make the distinction asserted above, "And therefore the desire of man is limited in this life to that *knowledge* (*scienza*) which may here be had, and passes not save by error that point which is beyond our natural understanding. And so is limited and measured in the angelic nature the amount of that *wisdom* which the nature of each is capable of receiving." Man is, according to Dante, superior to the angels in this, that he is capable both of reason and contemplation, while they are confined to the latter. That Beatrice's reproaches refer to no human *pargoletta*, the context shows where Dante asks,

"But wherefore so beyond my power of sight
Soars your desirable discourse that aye
The more I strive, so much the more I lose it?
That thou mayst recognize, she said, the school
Which thou hast followed, and mayst see how far
Its doctrine follows after my discourse,
And mayst behold your path from the divine
Distant as far as separated is
From earth the heaven that highest hastens on."

Purgatorio, XXXIII. 82-90.

The *pargoletta* in its ordinary sense was necessary to the literal and human meaning; but it is shockingly discordant with that non-natural interpretation which, according to Dante's repeated statement, lays open the true and divine meaning.

† "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you." Romans viii. 8, 9.

‡ *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 14, 15.

But what gives motion to the crystalline heaven (moral philosophy) itself? "The most fervent appetite which it has in each of its parts to be conjoined with each part of that most divine quiet heaven" (Theology).* Theology, the divine science, corresponds with the Empyrean, "because of its peace, the which, through the most excellent certainty of its subject, which is God, suffers no strife of opinions or sophistic arguments."† No one of the heavens is at rest but this, and in none of the inferior sciences can we find repose, though he likens physics to the heaven of the fixed stars, in whose name is a suggestion of the certitude to be arrived at in things demonstrable. Dante had this comparison in mind, it may be inferred, when he said,

"Well I perceive that never sated is
Our intellect unless the Truth illumine it
Beyond which nothing true [i. e. no partial truth] expands itself.
It rests therein as wild beast in his lair;
When it attains it, and it can attain it;
If not, then each desire would frustrate be.
Therefore springs up, in fashion of a shoot,
Doubt at the foot of truth; and this is nature
Which to the top from height to height impels us."‡

The contradiction, as it seems to us, resolves itself into an essential, easily apprehensible, if mystical, unity. Dante at first gave himself to the study of the sciences (after he had lost the simple unquestioning faith of youth) as the means of arriving at certainty. From the root of every truth to which he attained sprang this sucker (*rampollo*) of doubt, drawing out of it the very sap of its life. In this way was Philosophy truly an adversary of his soul, and the reason of his remorse for fruitless studies which drew him away from the one that alone was and could be fruitful is obvious enough. But by and by out of the very doubt came the sweetness§ of a higher and truer insight. He became aware that there were "things in heaven and earth undreamt of in your philosophy," as another doubter said, who had just finished *his* studies, but could not

* *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 4. Compare *Paradiso*, I. 76, 77.

† "Vain babblings and oppositions of science falsely so called." 1 Tim. vi. 20.

‡ *Paradiso*, IV. 124-132.

§ "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness. Judges xiv. 14.

find his way out of the scepticism they engendered as Dante did.

"Insane is he who hopeth that our reason
Can traverse the illimitable way
Which the one Substance in three Persons follows!
Mortals, remain contented at the *Quia*;
For, if ye had been able to see all,
No need there were [had been] for Mary to bring forth.
And ye have seen desiring without fruit,
Those whose desire would have been quieted
Which evermore is given them for a grief.
I speak of Aristotle and of Plato
And many others." *

Whether at the time when the poems of the *Vita Nuova* were written the Lady who withdrew him for a while from Beatrice was (which we doubt) a person of flesh and blood or not, she was no longer so when the prose narrative was composed. Any one familiar with Dante's double meanings will hardly question that by putting her at a window, which is a place to look out of, he intended to imply that she personified Speculation, a word which he uses with a wide range of meaning, sometimes as *looking for*, sometimes as *seeing* (like Shakespeare's

"There is no *speculation* in those eyes"),

sometimes as *intuition*, or the beholding all things in God who is the cause of all. This is so obvious, and the image in this

* *Purgatorio*, III. 34-44. The allusions in this passage are all to sayings of Saint Paul, of whom Dante was plainly a loving reader. "Remain contented at the *Quia*," that is, be satisfied with knowing *that* things are, without inquiring too nicely *how* or *why*. "Being justified by faith we have peace with God" (Rom. v. 1). *Infinita via*: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Rom. xi. 33.) *Aristotle and Plato*: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness. . . . For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that *they are without excuse*. Because that when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." (Rom. i. 18-21.) He refers to the Greeks. The Epistle to the Romans, by the way, would naturally be Dante's favorite. As Saint Paul made the Law, so he would make Science, "our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. iii. 24). He puts Aristotle and Plato in his *Inferno*, because they did not "adore God duly" (*Inferno*, IV. 38), that is, they "held the truth in unrighteousness." Yet he calls Aristotle "the master and guide of human reason" (*Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 6), and Plato "a most excellent man" (*Convito*, Tr. II. c. 5).

sense so familiar, that we are surprised it should have been hitherto unremarked. It is plain that, even when the *Vita Nuova* was written, the Lady was already Philosophy, but philosophy applied to a lower range of thought, not yet ascended from flesh to spirit. The Lady who seduced him was the science which looks for truth in second causes, or even in effects, instead of seeking it, where alone it can be found, in the First Cause; she was the Philosophy which looks for happiness in the visible world (of shadows), and not in the spiritual (and therefore substantial) world. The guerdon of his search was doubt. But Dante, as we have seen, made his very doubts help him upward toward certainty; each became a round in the ladder by which he climbed to clearer and clearer vision till the end.* Philosophy had made him forget Beatrice; it was Philosophy who was to bring him back to her again, washed clean in that very stream of forgetfulness that had made an impassable barrier between them.† Dante had known how to find in her the gift of Achilles's lance,

" Which used to be the cause
First of a sad and then a gracious boon." ‡

There is another possible, and even probable, theory which would reconcile the Beatrice of the *Purgatorio* with her of the *Vita Nuova*. Suppose that even in the latter she signified Theology, or at least some influence that turned his thoughts

* It is to be remembered that Dante has typified the same thing when he describes how Reason (Virgil) first carries him down by clinging to the fell of Satan, and then in the same way upwards again *a riveder le stelle*. Satan is the symbol of materialism, fixed at the point

" To which things heavy draw from every side ";

as God is Light and Warmth, so is he "cold obstruction"; the very effort which he makes to rise by the motion of his wings begets the chilly blast that freezes him more immovably in his place of doom. The danger of all science save the highest (theology) was that it led to materialism. There appears to have been a great deal of it in Florence in the time of Dante. Its followers called themselves Epicureans, and burn in living tombs (*Inferno*, X). Dante held them in special horror. "Of all bestialities that is the most foolish and vile and hurtful which believes there is no other life after this." "And I so believe, so affirm, and so am certain that we pass to another better life after this" (*Convito*, Tr. II. c. 9). It is a fine divination of Carlyle from the *Non han speranza di morte* that "one day it had risen sternly benign in the scathed heart of Dante that he, wretched, never resting, worn as he was, would [should] full surely die."

† *Purgatorio*, XXXI. 103.

‡ *Inferno*, XXXI. 5, 6.

to God? Pietro di Dante, commenting the *pargoletta* passage in the *Purgatorio*, says expressly that the poet had at one time given himself to the study of theology and deserted it for poesy and other mundane sciences. This must refer to a period beginning before 1290. Again there is an early tradition that Dante in his youth had been a novice in a Franciscan convent, but never took the vows. Buti affirms this expressly in his comment on *Inferno*, XVI. 106–123. It is perhaps slightly confirmed by what Dante says in the *Convito* (Tr. IV. c. 28), that “one can not only turn to Religion by making himself like in habit and life to St. Benedict, St. Augustine, St. Francis, and St. Dominic, but likewise one may turn to good and true religion in a state of matrimony, for God wills no religion in us but of the heart.” If he had ever thought of taking monastic vows, his marriage would have cut short any such intention. If he ever wished to wed the real Beatrice Portinari, and was disappointed, might not this be the time when his thoughts took that direction? If so, the impulse came indirectly, at least, from her.

We have admitted that Beatrice Portinari was a real creature,

“Col sangue suo e con le sue giunture”;

but *how* real she was, and whether as real to the poet’s memory as to his imagination may fairly be questioned. She shifts, as the controlling emotion or the poetic fitness of the moment dictates, from a woman loved and lost to a gracious exhalation of all that is fairest in womanhood or most divine in the soul of man, and ere the eye has defined the new image it has become the old one again, or another mingled of both.

“Nor one nor other seemed now what it was,
E’en as proceedeth on before the flame
Upward along the paper a brown color,
Which is not black as yet, and the white dies.”*

As the mystic Griffin in the eyes of Beatrice (her demonstrations), so she in his own,

“Now with the one, now with the other nature;
Think, Reader, if within myself I marvelled
When I beheld the thing itself stand still
And in its image it transformed itself.”†

* *Inferno*, XXV. 64–67.

† *Purgatorio*, XXXI. 123–126.

At the very moment when she had undergone her most sublimated allegorical evaporation, his instinct as poet, which never failed him, realized her into woman again in those scenes of almost unapproached pathos which make the climax of his *Purgatorio*. The verses tremble with feeling and shine with tears.* Beatrice recalls her own beauty with a pride as natural as that of Fair Annie in the old ballad, and compares herself as advantageously with the "brown, brown bride" who had supplanted her. If this be a ghost, we do not need be told that she is a woman still.† We must remember, however,

* Spenser, who had, like Dante, a Platonizing side, and who was probably the first English poet since Chaucer that had read the *Commedia*, has imitated the pictorial part of these passages in the "Faerie Queene" (B. VI. c. 10). He has turned it into a compliment, and a very beautiful one, to a living mistress. It is instructive to compare the effect of his purely sensuous verses with that of Dante's, which have such a wonderful reach behind them. They are singularly pleasing, but they do not stay by us as those of his model had done by him. Spenser was as Milton called him, a "sage and serious poet"; he would be the last to take offence if we draw from him a moral not without its use now that Priapus is trying to persuade us that pose and drapery will make him as good as Urania. Better far the naked nastiness; the more covert the indecency, the more it shocks. Poor old god of gardens! Innocent as a clownish symbol, he is simply disgusting as an ideal of art. In the last century, they set him up in Germany and in France as befitting an era of enlightenment, the light of which came too manifestly from the wrong quarter to be long endurable.

† This touch of nature recalls another. The Italians claim humor for Dante. We have never been able to find it, unless it be in that passage (*Inferno*, XV. 119) where Brunetto Latini lingers under the burning shower to recommend his *Tesoro* to his former pupil. There is a comical touch of nature in an author's solicitude for his little work, not, as in Fielding's case, after *its*, but his own damnation. We are not sure, but we fancy we catch the momentary flicker of a smile across those serious eyes of Dante's. There is something like humor in the opening verses of the XVI *Paradiso*, where Dante tells us how even in heaven he could not help glorying in being gently born, — he who had devoted a *Canzone* and a book of the *Convito* to proving that nobility consisted wholly in virtue. But there is after all something touchingly natural in the feeling. Dante, unjustly robbed of his property, and with it of the independence so dear to him, seeing

"Needy nothings trimmed in jollity,
And captive Good attending Captain Ill,"

would naturally fall back on a distinction which money could neither buy nor replace. There is a curious passage in the *Convito* which shows how bitterly he resented his undeserved poverty. He tells us that buried treasure commonly revealed itself to the bad rather than the good. "Verily I saw the place on the flanks of a mountain in Tuscany called Falterona, where the basest peasant of the whole countryside digging found there more than a bushel of pieces of the finest silver, which perhaps had awaited him more than a thousand years." Tr. IV. c. 11. One can see the grimness of his face as he looked and thought, "how salt a savor hath the bread of others!"

that Beatrice had to be real that she might be interesting, to be beautiful that her goodness might be persuasive, nay, to be beautiful at any rate, because beauty has also something in it of divine. Dante has told, in a passage already quoted, that he would rather his readers should find his doctrine sweet than his verses, but he had his relents from this Stoicism.

“ Canzone, I believe those will be rare
 Who of thine inner sense can master all,
 Such toil it costs thy native tongue to learn;
 Wherefore, if ever it perchance befall
 That thou in presence of such men shouldst fare
 As seem not skilled thy meaning to discern,
 I pray thee then thy grief to comfort turn,
 Saying to them, O thou my new delight,
 ‘Take heed at least how fair I am to sight.’”*

We believe all Dante's other Ladies to have been as purely imaginary as the Dulcinea of Don Quixote, useful only as *motives*, but a real Beatrice is as essential to the human sympathies of the *Divina Commedia* as her glorified Idea to its allegorical teaching, and this Dante understood perfectly well. † Take *her* out of the poem, and the heart of it goes with her; take out her ideal, and it is emptied of its soul. She is the menstruum in which letter and spirit dissolve and mingle into unity. Those who doubt her existence must find Dante's graceful sonnet ‡ to Guido Cavalcante as provoking as Sancho's story of his having seen Dulcinea winnowing wheat was to his master, “so alien is it from all that which eminent persons, who are constituted and preserved for other exercises and entertainments, do and ought to do.”§ But we should always remember in reading Dante that with him the allegorical interpretation is the true one (*verace sposizione*), and that he represents himself (and that at a time when he was known to the world only by his minor poems) as having made righteousness (*rettitudine*, in other words, moral philosophy) the sub-

* *L'Envoi* of Canzone XIV. of the *Canzoniere*, I. of the *Convito*. Dante cites the first verse of this Canzone, *Paradiso*, VIII. 37.

† How Dante himself could allegorize even historical personages may be seen in a curious passage of the *Convito* (Tr. IV. c. 28), where, commenting on a passage of Lucan, he treats Martia and Cato as mere figures of speech.

‡ II. of the *Canzoniere*. See Fraticelli's preface.

§ *Don Quixote*, P. II. c. VIII.

ject of his verse.* Love with him seems first to have meant the love of truth and the search after it (*speculazione*), and afterwards the contemplation of it in its infinite source (*speculazione* in its higher and mystical sense). This is the divine love "which where it shines darkens and wellnigh extinguishes all other loves."† Wisdom is the object of it, and the end of wisdom to contemplate God the true mirror (*verace specchio, speculum*), wherein all things are seen as they truly are. Nay, she herself "is the brightness of the eternal light, the unspotted mirror of the majesty of God."‡

* *De vulgari Eloquentia*, LII. c. 2. He says the same of Giraud de Borneil, many of whose poems are moral and even devotional. See, particularly, *Al honor Dieu torn en mon chan* (Raynouard, *Lex Rom.*, I. 388), *Ben es dregz pos en aital port* (*Ib.*, 393), *Jois sia comensamens* (*Ib.*, 395), and *Be veg e conosco e say* (*Ib.*, 398). Another of his poems (*Ar ai grant joy*, Raynouard, *Choix*, III. 304) may possibly be a mystical profession of love for the Blessed Virgin, for whom, as Dante tells us, Beatrice had a special devotion.

† *Convito*, Tr. III. c. 14. In the same chapter is perhaps an explanation of the two rather difficult verses which follow that in which the *verace specchio* is spoken of (*Paradiso*, XXVI. 107, 108).

"Che fa di sè pareglie l' altre cose
E nulla face lui di sè pareglie."

Buti's comment is, "that is, makes of itself a receptacle to other things, that is, to all things that exist, which are all seen in it." Dante says (*ubi supra*), "The descending of the virtue of one thing into another is a reducing that other into a likeness of itself. . . . Whence we see that the sun sending his ray down hitherward reduces things to a likeness with his light in so far as they are able by their disposition to receive light from his power. So I say that God reduces this love to a likeness with himself as much as it is possible for it to be like him." In Provençal *pareilh* means *like*, and Dante may have formed his word from it. But the four earliest printed texts read:—

"Che fa di sè pareglie all' altre cose."

Accordingly we are inclined to think that the next verse should be corrected thus:—

"E nulla face a lui di sè pareglie."

We would form *pareglie* from *parere* (a something in which things appear), as *miraglio* from *mirare* (a something in which they are seen). God contains all things in himself, but nothing can wholly contain him. The blessed behold all things in him as if reflected, but not one of the things so reflected is capable of his image in its completeness. This interpretation is confirmed by *Paradiso*, XIX. 49–51.

"E quinci appar ch' ogni minor natura
È corto recettacolo a quel bene
Che non ha fine, e sè con sè misura."

‡ "Wisdom of Solomon," VII. 26, quoted by Dante (*Convito*, Tr. III. c. 15). There are other passages in the "Wisdom of Solomon" besides that just cited which

There are two beautiful passages in the *Convito*, which we shall quote, both because they have, as we believe, a close application to Dante's own experience, and because they are good specimens of his style as a writer of prose. In the manly simplicity which comes of an earnest purpose, and in the eloquence of deep conviction, this is as far beyond that of any of his contemporaries as his verse; nay, more, has hardly been matched by any Italian from that day to this. Illustrating the position that "the highest desire of everything and the first given us by nature is to return to its first cause," he says: "And since God is the beginning of our souls and the maker of them like unto himself, according as was written, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness,' this soul most greatly desires to return to him. And as a pilgrim who goes by a way he has never travelled, who believes every house he sees afar off to be

we may well believe Dante to have had in his mind when writing the *Canzone* beginning,

"Amor che nella mente mi ragiona,"

and the commentary upon it, and some to which his experience of life must have given an intenser meaning. The writer of that book also personifies Wisdom as the mistress of his soul: "I loved her and sought her out from my youth, I desired to make her my spouse, and I was a lover of her beauty." He says of Wisdom that she was "present when thou (God) madest the world," and Dante in the same way identifies her with the divine Logos, citing as authority the "beginning of the Gospel of John." He tells us, "I perceived that I could not otherwise obtain her except God gave her me," and Dante came at last to the same conclusion. Again, "For the very true beginning of her is the desire of discipline; and the care of discipline is love. And love is the keeping of her laws; and the giving heed unto her laws is the assurance of incorruption." But who can doubt that he read with a bitter exultation, and applied to himself passages like these which follow? "When the righteous fled from his brother's wrath, she guided him in right paths, showed him the kingdom of God, and gave him knowledge of holy things. She defended him from his enemies and kept him safe from those that lay in wait, . . . that he might know that godliness is stronger than all. . . . She forsook him not, but delivered him from sin; she went down with him into the pit and left him not in bonds till she brought him the sceptre of the kingdom, . . . and gave him perpetual glory." It was, perhaps from this book that Dante got the hint of making his punishments and penances typical of the sins that earned them, "Wherefore, whereas men lived dissolutely and unrighteously, thou hast tormented them with their own abominations." Dante was intimate with the Scriptures. They do even a scholar no harm. M. Victor Le Clerc, in his *Histoire Littéraire de la France au quatorzième siècle* (Tom. II. p. 72), thinks it "not impossible" that a passage in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, paraphrased by Dante, may have been suggested to him by Rutebeuf or Tristan, rather than by the prophet himself! Dante would hardly have found himself so much at home in the company of *jongleurs* as in that of prophets.

his inn, and not finding it to be so directs his belief to another, and so from house to house till he come to the inn, so our soul forthwith on entering upon the new and never-travelled road of this life directs its eyes to the goal of its highest good, and therefore believes whatever thing it sees that seems to have in it any good to be that. And because its first knowledge is imperfect by reason of not being experienced nor indoctrinated, small goods seem to it great. Wherefore we see children desire most greatly an apple, and then proceeding further on desire a bird, and then further yet desire fine raiment, and then a horse, and then a woman, and then riches not great, and then greater and greater. And this befalls because in none of these things it finds that which it goes seeking, and thinks to find it further on. By which it may be seen that one desirable stands before another in the eyes of our soul in a fashion as it were pyramidal, for the smallest at first covers the whole of them, and is as it were the apex of the highest desirable, which is God, as it were the base of all; so that the further we go from the apex toward the base the desirables appear greater; and this is the reason why human desires become wider one after the other. Verily this way is lost through error as the roads of earth are; for as from one city to another there is of necessity one best and straightest way, and one that always leads farther from it, that is, the one which goes elsewhere, and many others, some less roundabout and some less direct, so in human life are divers roads whereof one is the truest and another the most deceitful, and certain ones less deceitful, and certain less true. And as we see that that which goes most directly to the city fulfils desire and gives repose after weariness, and that which goes the other way never fulfils it and never can give repose, so it falls out in our life. The good traveller arrives at the goal and repose, the erroneous never arrives thither, but with much weariness of mind, always with greedy eyes looks before him.”* If we may apply Dante’s own method of exposition to this passage, we find him telling us that he first sought felicity in knowledge,

“That apple sweet which through so many branches
The care of mortals goeth in pursuit of,”†

* *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 12.

† *Purgatorio*, XXVII. 115, 116.

then in fame, a bird that flits before us as we follow,* then in being esteemed of men ("to be clothed in purple, . . . to sit next to Darius, . . . and be called Darius his cousin"), then in power,† then in the riches of the Holy Spirit in larger and larger measure.‡ He, too, had found that there was but one straight road, whether to the Terrestrial Paradise or the Celestial City, and may come to question by and by whether they be not parallel one with the other, or even parts of the same road, by which only repose is to be reached at last. Then, when in old age "the noble soul returns to God as to that port whence she set forth on the sea of this life, . . . just as to him who comes from a long journey, before he enters into the gate of his city, the citizens thereof go forth to meet him, so the citizens of the eternal life go to meet *her*, and do so because of her good deeds and contemplations, who, having already betaken herself to God, seems to see those whom she believes to be nigh unto God."§ This also was to be the experience of Dante, for who can doubt that the *Paradiso* was something very unlike a poetical exercise to him who appeals to the visions even of sleep as proof of the soul's immortality?

When did his soul catch a glimpse of that certainty in which "the mind that museth upon many things" can find assured rest? We have already said that we believed Dante's political opinions to have taken their final shape and the *De Monarchia* to have been written before 1300.|| That the revision of the

* That Dante loved fame we need not be told. He several times confesses it, especially in the *De vulgari Eloquentia*, I. 17. "How glorious she (the Vulgar Tongue) makes her intimates (*familiars*, those of her household), we ourselves have known, who in the sweetness of this glory put our exile behind our backs."

† Dante several times uses the sitting a horse as an image of rule. See especially *Purgatorio*, VI. 99, and *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 11.

‡ "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!" Dante quotes this in speaking of the influence of the stars, which, interpreting it presently "by the theological way," he compares to that of the Holy Spirit. "And thy counsel who hath known, except thou give wisdom and send thy Holy Spirit from above?" (Wisdom of Solomon, IX. 17.) The last words of the *Convito* are, "her (Philosophy) whose proper dwelling is in the depths of the divine mind." The ordinary reading is *ragione* (reason), but it seems to us an obvious blunder for *magione* (mansion, dwelling).

§ *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 28.

|| He refers to a change in his own opinions (L. II. § 1), where he says, "When I knew the nations to have murmured against the pre-eminence of the Roman people, and saw the people imagining vain things as *I myself was wont*." He was a Guelf by inheritance, he became a Ghibelline by conviction.

Vita Nuova was completed in that year seems probable from the last sonnet but one, which is addressed to pilgrims on their way to the Santa Veronica at Rome.* In this sonnet he still laments Beatrice as dead; he would make the pilgrims share his grief. It is the very folly of despairing sorrow, that calls on the first comer, stranger though he be, for a sympathy which none can fully give, and he least of all. But in the next sonnet, the last in the book, there is a surprising change of tone. The transfiguration of Beatrice has begun, and we see completing itself that natural gradation of grief which will ere long bring the mourner to call on the departed saint to console him for her own loss. The sonnet is remarkable in more senses than one, first for its psychological truth, and then still more for the light it throws on Dante's inward history as poet and thinker. Hitherto he had celebrated beauty and goodness in the creature; henceforth he was to celebrate them in the Creator whose praise they were.† We give an extempore translation of this sonnet, in which the meaning is preserved so far as is possible where the grace is left out. We remember with some compunction as we do it, that Dante has said, "know every one that nothing harmonized by a musical band can be transmuted from its own speech to another with-

* It should seem from Dante's words ("at the time when much people went to see the blessed image," and "ye seem to come from a far-off people") that this was some extraordinary occasion, and what so likely as the jubilee of 1300? (Compare *Paradiso*, XXXI. 103-108.) Dante's comparisons are so constantly drawn from actual eyesight, that his allusion (*Inferno*, XVIII. 28-33) to a device of Boniface VIII. for passing the crowds quietly across the bridge of Saint Angelo, renders it not unlikely that he was in Rome at that time, and perhaps conceived his poem there as Giovanni Villani his chronicle. That Rome would deeply stir his mind and heart is beyond question. "And certes I am of a firm opinion that the stones that stand in her walls are worthy of reverence, and the soil where she sits worthy beyond what is preached and admitted of men." — *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 5.

† *Beatrice, loda di Dio vera, Inferno*, II. 103. "Surely vain are all men by nature who are ignorant of God, and could not out of the good things that are seen know him that is, neither by considering the works did they acknowledge the work-master. . . . For, being conversant in his works they search diligently and believe their sight, because the things are beautiful that are seen. Howbeit, neither are they to be pardoned." (Wisdom of Solomon, XIII. 1, 7, 8.) *Non adorar debitamente Dio*. "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead; so that they are without excuse." It was these "invisible things" whereof Dante was beginning to get a glimpse.

out breaking all its sweetness and harmony,"* and Cervantes was of the same mind : † —

"Beyond the sphere that hath the widest gyre
 Passeth the sigh ‡ that leaves my heart below ;
 A new intelligence doth love bestow
 On it with tears that ever draws it higher ;
 When it wins thither where is its desire,
 A Lady it beholds who honor so
 And light receives, that, through her splendid glow,
 The pilgrim spirit § sees her as in fire ;
 It sees her such, that, telling me again
 I understand it not, it speaks so low
 Unto the mourning heart that bids it tell ;
 Its speech is of that noble One I know,
 For ' Beatrice ' I often hear full plain,
 So that, dear ladies, I conceive it well."

No one can read this in its connection with what goes before and what follows without feeling that a new conception of Beatrice had dawned upon the mind of Dante, dim as yet, or purposely made to seem so, and yet the authentic forerunner of the fulness of her rising as the light of his day and the guide of his feet, the divine wisdom whose glory pales all meaner stars. The conception of a poem in which Dante's creed in politics and morals should be picturesquely and attractively embodied, and of the high place which Beatrice should take in it, had begun vaguely to shape itself in his thought. As he brooded over it, of a sudden it defined itself clearly. " Soon after this sonnet there appeared to me a marvellous vision || wherein I saw things which made me propose

* *Convito*, Tr. I. c. 7.

† " And here we would have forgiven Mr. Captain if he had not betrayed him (*traído, traduttore traditore*) to Spain and made him a Castilian, for he took away much of his native worth, and so will all those do who shall undertake to turn a poem into another tongue ; for with all the care they take and ability they show, they will never reach the height of its original conception," says the Curate, speaking of a translation of Ariosto. *Don Quixote*, P. I. c. 6.

‡ In his own comment Dante says, " I tell whither goes my thought calling it by the name of one of its effects."

§ *Spirito* means in Italian both breath (*spirito ed acqua fessi*, *Purgatorio*, XXX. 98) and spirit.

|| By *visione* Dante means something seen waking by the inner eye. He believed also that dreams were divinely inspired, and argues from such the immortality of the soul. (*Convito*, Tr. II. c. 9.)

not to say more of that blessed one until I could treat of her more worthily. And to arrive at that I study all I can, as she verily knows. So that, if it be the pleasure of Him through whom all things live, that my life hold out yet a few years, I hope to say that of her which was never yet said of any (woman). And then may it please Him who is the Lord of Courtesy that my soul may go to see the glory of her Lady, that is, of that blessed Beatrice who gloriously beholds the face of Him *qui est per omnia sæcula benedictus*." It was the method of presentation that became clear to Dante at this time,—the plan of the great poem for whose completion the experience of earth and the inspiration of heaven were to combine, and which was to make him lean for many years.* The doctrinal scope of it was already determined. Man, he tells us, is the only creature who partakes at once of the corruptible and incorruptible nature; "and since every nature is ordained to some ultimate end, it follows that the end of man is double. And as among all beings he alone partakes of the corruptible and incorruptible, so alone among all beings he is ordained to a double end, whereof the one is his end as corruptible, the other as incorruptible. That unspeakable Providence therefore foreordered two ends to be pursued by man, to wit, beatitude in this life, which consists in the operation of our own virtue, and is figured by the Terrestrial Paradise, and the beatitude of life eternal, which consists in a fruition of the divine countenance, whereto our own virtue cannot ascend unless aided by divine light, which is understood by the Celestial Paradise." The one we attain by practice of the moral and intellectual virtues as they are taught by philosophers, the other by spiritual teachings transcending human reason, and the practice of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. For one, Reason suffices ("which was wholly made known to us by philosophers"), for the other we need the light of supernatural truth revealed by the Holy Spirit and "needful for us." Men led astray by cupidity turn their backs on both, and in their bestiality need bit and rein to keep them in the way. "Wherefore to man was a double guidance needful according to the

* *Paradiso*, XXV: 1-3.

double end," the Supreme Pontiff in spiritual, the Emperor in temporal things.*

But how to put this theory of his into a poetic form which might charm while it was teaching? He would typify Reason in Virgil (who would serve also as a symbol of political wisdom as having celebrated the founding of the Empire), and the grace of God in that Beatrice whom he had already supernaturalized into something that "passed all understanding." In choosing Virgil he was sure of that interest and sympathy which his instinct led him to seek in the predisposition of his readers, for the popular imagination of the Middle Ages had busied itself particularly with the Mantuan poet. The Church had given him a quasi orthodoxy by interpreting his *jam redit et virgo* as a prophecy of the birth of Christ. At Naples he had become a kind of patron saint, and his bones were exhibited as relics. Dante himself may have heard at Mantua the hymn sung on the anniversary of Saint Paul, in which the apostle to the Gentiles is represented as weeping at the tomb of the greatest of poets. Above all Virgil had described the descent of Æneas to the under world. Dante's choice of a guide was therefore made, in a certain degree, for him. But the mere Reason † of man without the illumination of the divine Grace

* *De Monarchia*, L. III. § ult. See the whole passage in Miss Rossetti, p. 39. It is noticeable that Dante says that the Pope is to *lead* (by example), the Emperor to *direct* (by the enforcing of justice). The duty, we are to observe, was a double but not a divided one. To exemplify this unity was indeed the object of the *Commedia*.

† "What Reason seeth here

Myself [Virgil] can tell thee; beyond that await

For Beatrice, since 't is a work of Faith." — *Purgatorio*, XVIII. 46 – 48.

Beatrice here evidently impersonates Theology. It would be interesting to know what was the precise date of Dante's theological studies. The earlier commentators all make him go to Paris, the great fountain of such learning, after his banishment. Boccaccio indeed says that he did not return to Italy till 1311: Wegele (Dante's *Leben und Werke*, p. 85) puts the date of his journey between 1292 and 1297. Ozanam, with a pathos comically touching to the academic soul, laments that poverty compelled him to leave the university without the degree he had so justly earned. He consoles himself with the thought that "there remained to him an incontestable erudition and the love of serious studies." (*Dante et la philosophie catholique*, p. 112.) It is sad that we cannot write *Dantes Alighierius, S. T. D.*! Dante seems to imply that he began to devote himself to Philosophy and Theology shortly after Beatrice's death. (*Convito*, Tr. II. c. 13.) He compares himself to one who, "seeking silver, should, without meaning it, find gold, which an occult cause presents to him, not perhaps without the divine command." Here again

cannot be trusted, and accordingly the intervention of Beatrice was needed, — of Beatrice, as Miss Rossetti admirably well expresses it, “already transfigured, potent not only now to charm and soothe, potent to rule; to the Intellect a light, to the Affections a compass and a balance, a sceptre over the Will.”

The wood obscure in which Dante finds himself is the world. The three beasts who dispute his way are the sins that most easily beset us, Pride, the Lusts of the Flesh, and Greed. We are surprised that Miss Rossetti should so localize and confine Dante's meaning as to explain them by Florence, France, and Rome. Had he written in so narrow a sense as this, it would indeed be hard to account for the persistent power of his poem. But it was no political pamphlet that Dante was writing. *Subjectum est Homo*, and it only takes the form of a diary by Dante Alighieri because of the intense realism of his imagination, a realism as striking in the *Paradiso* as the *Inferno*, though it takes a different shape. Everything, the most supersensual, presented itself to his mind, not as abstract idea, but as visible type. As men could once embody a quality of good in a saint and see it, as they even now in moments of heightened fantasy or enthusiasm can personify their country and speak of England, France, or America as if they were real beings, so did Dante habitually.* He saw all his thoughts as distinctly as the hypochondriac sees his black dog, and, as in that, their form and color were but the outward form of an inward and spiritual condition. Whatever subsidiary interpretations the poem is capable of, its great and primary value is as the autobiography of a human soul, of yours and mine, it may be, as well as Dante's. In that lie its profound meaning and its permanent force. That an exile, a proud man forced to be dependent, should have found some consolation in brooding over the justice of God, weighed in such different scales from those of man, in contrasting the outward prosperity of the sinner with the awful spiritual ruin within, is not wonder-

apparently is an allusion to his having found Wisdom while he sought Learning. He had thought to find God in the beauty of his works, he learned to seek all things in God.

* As we have seen, even a sigh becomes *He*. This makes one of the difficulties of translating his minor poems. The modern mind is incapable of this subtlety.

ful, nay, we can conceive of his sometimes finding the wrath of God sweeter than his mercy. But it is wonderful that out of the very wreck of his own life he should have built this three-arched bridge, still firm against the wash and wear of ages, stretching from the Pit to the Empyrean, by which men may pass from a doubt of God's providence to a certainty of his long-suffering and loving-kindness.

"The Infinite Goodness hath such ample arms
That it receives whatever turns to it." *

A tear is enough to secure the saving clasp of them.† It cannot be too often repeated that Dante's Other World is not in its first conception a place of *departed* spirits. It is the Spiritual World, whereof we become denizens by birth and citizens by adoption. It is true that for artistic purposes he makes it conform so far as possible with vulgar preconceptions, but he himself has told us again and again what his real meaning was. Virgil tells Dante, —

"Thou shalt behold the people dolorous
Who have foregone the good of intellect." ‡

The "good of the intellect," Dante tells us after Aristotle, is Truth.§ He says that Virgil has led him "through the deep night of the *truly dead*."|| Who are they? Dante had in mind the saying of the Apostle, "to be carnally-minded is death." He says: "In man to live is to use reason. Then if living is the being of man, to depart from that use is to depart from being, and so to be dead. And doth not he depart from the use of reason who doth not reason out the object of his life?" "I say that so vile a person is dead, seeming to be alive. For we must know *that the wicked man may be called truly dead*." "He is dead who follows not the teacher. And of such a one some might say, how is he dead and yet goes about? I answer that the man is dead and the beast remains."¶ Accordingly he has put living persons in the *In-*

* *Purgatorio*, III. 122, 123.

† *Purgatorio*, V. 107.

‡ *Inferno*, III. 17, 18 (*hanno perduto* = thrown away).

§ *Convito*, Tr. II. c. 14.

|| *Purgatorio*, XXIII. 121, 122.

¶ *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 7.

ferno, like Frate Alberigo and Branca d' Oria, of whom he says with bitter sarcasm that he still "eats and drinks and puts on clothes," as if that were his highest ideal of the true ends of life.* There is a passage in the first canto of the *Inferno* † which has been variously interpreted: —

"The ancient spirits disconsolate
Who cry out each one for the *second death*."

Miss Rossetti cites it as an example of what she felicitously calls "an ambiguity, not hazy, but prismatic, and therefore not really perplexing." She gives us accordingly our choice of two interpretations, "'each cries out on account of the second death which he is suffering,' and 'each cries out for death to come a second time and ease him of his sufferings.'" ‡ Buti says: "Here one doubts what the author meant by the second death, and as for me I think he meant the last damnation, which shall be at the day of judgment, because they would wish through envy that it had already come, that they might have more companions, since the first death is the first damnation, when the soul parted from the body is condemned to the pains of hell for its sins. The second is when, resuscitated at the judgment day, they shall be finally condemned, soul and body together. . . . It may otherwise be understood as annihilation." Imola says, "Each would wish to die again, if he could, to put an end to his pain. Do not hold with some who think that Dante calls the second death the day of judgment," and then quotes a passage from St. Augustine which favors that view. Pietro di Dante gives us four interpretations among which to choose, the first being that, "allegorically, depraved and vicious men are in a certain sense dead in reputation, and this is the first death; the second is that of the body." This we believe to be the true meaning. Dante himself, in a letter to the "most rascally (*scelestissimis*) dwellers in Florence," gives us the key: "but you, transgressors of the laws of God and man, whom the direful maw of cupidity hath enticed not unwilling to every

* *Inferno*, XXXIII. 118, *seqq.*

† *Inferno*, 116, 117.

‡ Mr. Longfellow's *for*, like the Italian *per*, gives us the same privilege of election. We "freeze for cold," we "hunger for food."

crime, does not the terror of the *second death* torment you?" Their first death was in their sins, the second is what they may expect from the just vengeance of the Emperor Henry VII. The world Dante leads us through is that of his own thought, and it need not surprise us therefore if we meet in it purely imaginary beings like Tristrem* and Renoard of the club.† His personality is so strongly marked that it is nothing more than natural that his poem should be interpreted as if only he and his opinions, prejudices, or passions were concerned. He would not have been the great poet he was if he had not felt intensely and humanly, but he could never have won the cosmopolitan place he holds had he not known how to generalize his special experience into something mediatorial for all of us. Pietro di Dante in his comment on the thirty-first canto of the *Purgatorio* says that "unless you understand him and his figures allegorically, you will be deceived by the bark," and adds that our author made his pilgrimage as the representative of the rest (*in persona ceterorum*).‡ To give his vision reality, he has adapted it to the vulgar mythology, but to understand it as the author meant, it must be taken in the larger sense. To confine it to Florence or to Italy is to banish it from the sympathies of mankind. It was not from the campanile of the Badia that Dante got his views of life and man.

The relation of Dante to literature is monumental, and marks the era at which the modern begins. He is not only the first great poet, but the first great prose writer who used a language not yet subdued to literature, who used it moreover

* *Inferno*, V. 67.

† *Paradiso*, XVIII. 46. Renoard is one of the heroes (a rudely humorous one) in *la Bataille d'Alischans*, an episode of the measureless *Guillaume d'Orange*. It was from the graves of those supposed to have been killed in this battle that Dante draws a comparison, *Inferno*, IX. Boccaccio's comment on this passage might have been read to advantage by the French editors of *Alischans*.

‡ We cite this comment under its received name, though it is uncertain if Pietro were the author of it. Indeed, we strongly doubt it. It is at least one of the earliest, for it appears by the comment on *Paradiso*, XXVI., that the greater part of it was written before 1341. It is remarkable for the strictness with which it holds to the spiritual interpretation of the poem, and deserves much more to be called *Ottimo* than the comment which goes by that name. Its publication is due to the zeal and liberality of the late Lord Vernon, to whom students of Dante are also indebted for the parallel-text reprint of the four earliest editions of the *Commedia*.

for scientific and metaphysical discussion, thus giving an incalculable impulse to the culture of his countrymen by making the laity free of what had hitherto been the exclusive guild of clerks.* Whatever poetry had preceded him, whether in the Romance or Teutonic tongues, is interesting mainly for its simplicity without forethought, or, as in the *Nibelungen*, for a kind of savage grandeur that rouses the sympathy of whatever of the natural man is dormant in us. But it shows no trace of the creative faculty either in unity of purpose or style, the proper characteristics of literature. If it have the charm of wanting artifice, it has not the higher charm of art. We are in the realm of chaos and chance, nebular, with phosphorescent gleams here and there, star-stuff, but uncondensed in stars. The *Nibelungen* is not without far-reaching hints and forebodings of something finer than we find in it, but they are a glamour from the vague darkness which encircles it, like the whisper of the sea upon an unknown shore at night, powerful only over the more vulgar side of the imagination, and leaving no thought, scarce even any image (at least of beauty) behind them. Such poems are the amours, not the lasting friendships and possessions of the mind. They thrill and cannot satisfy.

But Dante is not merely the founder of modern literature. He would have been that if he had never written anything more than his *Canzoni*, which for elegance, variety of rhythm, and fervor of sentiment were something altogether new. They are of a higher mood than any other poems of the same style in their own language, or indeed in any other. In beauty of phrase and subtlety of analogy they remind one of some of the Greek tragic choruses. We are constantly moved in them by a nobleness of tone, whose absence in many admired lyrics of the kind is poorly supplied by conceits. So perfect is Dante's mastery of his material, that in compositions, as he himself has shown, so artificial,† the form seems rather organic than

* See Wegele, *ubi supra*, p. 174, *seqq.* The best analysis of Dante's opinions we have ever met with is Emil Ruth's *Studien über Dante Alighieri*, Tübingen, 1853. Unhappily it wants an index, and accordingly loses a great part of its usefulness for those not already familiar with the subject. Nor are its references sufficiently exact. We always respect Dr. Ruth's opinions, if we do not wholly accept them, for they are all the results of original and assiduous study.

† See the second book of the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. "I the writer heard Dante

mechanical, which cannot be said of the best of the Provençal poets who led the way in this kind. Dante's sonnets also have a grace and tenderness which have been seldom matched. His lyrical excellence would have got him into the Collections, and he would have made here and there an enthusiast as Donne does in English, but his great claim to remembrance is not merely Italian. It is that he was the first Christian poet, in any proper sense of the word, the first who so subdued dogma to the uses of plastic imagination as to make something that is still poetry of the highest order after it has suffered the disenchantment inevitable in the most perfect translation. Verses of the kind usually called *sacred* (reminding one of the adjective's double meaning) had been written before his time in the vulgar tongue, — such verses as remain inviolably sacred in the volumes of specimens, looked at with distant reverence by the pious, and with far other feelings by the profane reader. There were cycles of poems in which the physical conflict between Christianity and Paganism* furnished the subject, but in which the theological views of the authors, whether doctrinal or historical, could hardly be reconciled with any system of religion ancient or modern. There were Church legends of saints and martyrs versified, fit certainly to make any other form of martyrdom seem amiable to those who heard them, and to suggest palliative thoughts about Diocletian. Finally, there were the romances of Arthur and his knights, which later, by means of allegory, contrived to be both entertaining and edifying; every one who listened to them paying the minstrel his money, and having his choice whether he would take them as song or sermon. In the heroes of

say that never verse had drawn him to say other than what he meant, but that many a time and oft he had made words say in his verses other than that they were wont to express in other poets." (*Ottimo Comento, Inferno*, X. 85.) The only other Italian poet who reminds us of Dante in sustained dignity is Guido Guinicelli. Dante esteemed him highly, calls him *maximus* in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, and "the father of me and of my betters," in the XXVI *Purgatorio*. See some excellent specimens of him in Mr. D. G. Rossetti's remarkable volume of translations from the early Italian poets. Mr. Rossetti would do a real and lasting service to literature by employing his singular gift in putting Dante's minor poems into English.

* The old French poems confound all unbelievers together as Pagans and worshippers of idols.

some of these certain Christian virtues were typified, and around a few of them, as the Holy Grail, a perfume yet lingers of cloistered piety and withdrawal. Wolfram von Eschenbach, indeed, has divided his *Parzival* into three books, of Simplicity, Doubt, and Healing, which has led Gervinus to trace a not altogether fanciful analogy between that poem and the *Divina Commedia*. The doughty old poet, who says of himself, —

“ Of song I have some slight control,
But deem her of a feeble soul
That doth not love my naked sword
Above my sweetest lyric word,”

tells us that his subject is the choice between good and evil ;

“ Whose soul takes Untruth for its bride
And sets himself on Evil’s side,
Chooses the Black, and sure it is
His path leads down to the abyss ;
But he who doth his nature feed
With steadfastness and loyal deed
Lies open to the heavenly light
And takes his portion with the White.”

But Wolfram’s poem has no system, and shows good feeling rather than settled conviction. Above all it is wandering (as he himself confesses), and altogether wants any controlling purpose. But to whatever extent Christianity had insinuated itself into and colored European literature, it was mainly as mythology. The Christian idea had never yet incorporated itself. It was to make its avatar in Dante. To understand fully what he accomplished we must form some conception of what is meant by the Christian idea. To bring it into fuller relief, let us contrast it with the Greek idea as it appears in poetry ; for we are not dealing with a question of theology so much as with one of æsthetics.

Greek art at its highest point is doubtless the most perfect that we know. But its circle of motives was essentially limited ; and the Greek drama in its passion, its pathos, and its humor is primarily Greek, and secondarily human. Its tragedy chooses its actors from certain heroic families, and finds its springs of pity and terror in physical suffering and worldly misfortune. Its best examples, like the *Antigone*, illustrate a

single duty, or, like the *Hippolytus*, a single passion, on which, as on a pivot, the chief character, statuesquely simple in its details, revolves as pieces of sculpture are sometimes made to do, displaying its different sides in one invariable light. The general impression left on the mind (and this is apt to be a truer one than any drawn from single examples) is that the duty is one which is owed to custom, that the passion leads to a breach of some convention settled by common consent,* and accordingly it is an outraged society whose figure looms in the background, rather than an offended God. At most it was one god of many, and meanwhile another might be friendly. In the Greek epic, the gods are partisans, they hold caucuses, they lobby and log-roll for their candidates. The tacit admission of a revealed code of morals wrought a great change. The complexity and range of passion is vastly increased when the offence is at once both crime and sin, a wrong done against order and against conscience at the same time. The relation of the Greek Tragedy to the higher powers is chiefly antagonistic, struggle against an implacable destiny, sublime struggle, and of heroes, but sure of defeat at last. And that defeat is final. Grand figures are those it exhibits to us, in some respects unequalled, and in their severe simplicity they compare with modern poetry as sculpture with painting. Considered merely as works of art, however, these products of the Greek imagination satisfy our highest conception of form. They suggest inevitably a feeling of perfect completeness, isolation, and independence, of something rounded and finished in itself. The secret of those old shapers died with them; their wand is broken, their book sunk deeper than ever plummet sounded. The type of their work is the Greek Temple, which leaves nothing to hope for in unity and perfection of design, in harmony and subordination of parts, and in entireness of impression. But in this æsthetic completeness it ends. It rests solidly and complacently on the earth, and the mind rests there with it.

Now the Christian idea has to do with the human soul, which

* Dante is an ancient in this respect as in many others, but the difference is that with him society is something divinely ordained. He follows Aristotle pretty closely, but on his own theory crime and sin are identical.

Christianity may be almost said to have invented. While all Paganism represents a few pre-eminent families, the founders of dynasties or ancestors of races, as of kin with the gods, Christianity makes every pedigree end in Deity, makes monarch and slave the children of one God. Its heroes struggle not against, but upward and onward *toward*, the higher powers who are always on their side. Its highest conception of beauty is not æsthetic, but moral. With it prosperity and adversity have exchanged meanings. It finds enemies in those worldly good-fortunes where Pagan and even Hebrew literature saw the highest blessing, and invincible allies in sorrow, poverty, humbleness of station, where the former world recognized only implacable foes. While it utterly abolished all boundary lines of race or country and made mankind unitary, its hero is always the individual man whoever and wherever he may be. Above all, an entirely new conception of the Infinite and of man's relation to it came in with Christianity. That, and not the finite, is always the background, consciously or not. It changed the scene of the last act of every drama to the next world. Endless aspiration of all the faculties became thus the ideal of Christian life, and to express it more or less perfectly the ideal of essentially Christian art. It was this which the Middle Ages instinctively typified in the Gothic cathedral, — no accidental growth, but the visible symbol of an inward faith, — which soars forever upward, and yearns toward heaven a like martyr-flame suddenly turned to stone.

It is not without significance that Goethe, who, like Dante, also absorbed and represented the tendency and spirit of his age, should during his youth and while Europe was alive with the moral and intellectual longing which preluded the French Revolution, have loved the Gothic architecture. It is no less significant that in the period of reaction toward more positive thought which followed he should have preferred the Greek. His greatest poem, conceived during the former era, is Gothic. Dante, endeavoring to conform himself to literary tradition, began to write the *Divina Commedia* in Latin, and had elaborated several cantos of it in that dead and intractable material. But that poetic instinct, which is never the instinct of an individual, but of his age, could not so be satisfied, and leaving the classic

structure he had begun to stand as a monument of failure, he completed his work in Italian. Instead of endeavoring to manufacture a great poem out of what was foreign and artificial, he let the poem make itself out of him. The epic which he wished to write in the universal language of scholars, and which might have had its ten lines in the history of literature, would sing itself in provincial Tuscan, and turns out to be written in the universal dialect of mankind. Thus all great poets have been in a certain sense provincial, — Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Burns, Scott in the “Heart of Midlothian” and “Bride of Lammermoor,” — because the office of the poet is always vicarious, because nothing that has not been living experience can become living expression, because the collective thought, the faith, the desire of a nation or a race, is the cumulative result of many ages, is something organic, and is wiser and stronger than any single person, and will make a great statesman or a great poet out of any man who can entirely surrender himself to it.

As the Gothic cathedral, then, is the type of the Christian idea, so is it also of Dante's poem. And as that in its artistic unity is but the completed thought of a single architect, which yet could never have been realized except out of the faith and by the contributions of an entire people, whose beliefs and superstitions, whose imaginations and fancy, find expression in its statues and its carvings, its calm saints and martyrs now at rest forever in the seclusion of their canopied niches, and its wanton grotesques thrusting themselves forth from every pinnacle and gargoyle, so in Dante's poem, while it is as personal and peculiar as if it were his private journal and autobiography, we can yet read the diary and the autobiography of the thirteenth century and of the Italian people. Complete and harmonious in design as his work is, it is yet no Pagan temple enshrining a type of the human made divine by triumph of corporeal beauty; it is not a private chapel housing a single saint and dedicate to one chosen bloom of Christian piety or devotion; it is truly a cathedral, over whose high altar hangs the emblem of suffering, of the Divine made human to teach the beauty of adversity, the eternal presence of the spiritual, not overhanging and threatening,

but informing and sustaining the material. In this cathedral of Dante's there are side-chapels as is fit, with altars to all Christian virtues and perfections; but the great impression of its leading thought is that of aspiration, for ever and ever. In the three divisions of the poem we may trace something more than a fancied analogy with a Christian basilica. There is first the ethnic forecourt, then the purgatorial middle-space, and last the holy of holies dedicated to the eternal presence of the mediatorial God.

But what gives Dante's poem a peculiar claim to the title of the first Christian poem is not merely its doctrinal truth or its Christian mythology, but the fact that the scene of it is laid, not in this world, but in the soul of man; that it is the allegory of a human life, and therefore universal in its significance and its application. The genius of Dante has given to it such a self-subsistent reality, that one almost gets to feel as if the chief value of contemporary Italian history had been to furnish it with explanatory foot-notes, and the age in which it was written assumes towards it the place of a satellite. For Italy, Dante is the thirteenth century.

Most men make the voyage of life as if they carried sealed orders which they were not to open till they are in sight of their port. But Dante had made up his mind as to the true purpose and meaning of our existence in this world, shortly after he had passed his twenty-fifth year. He had already conceived the system about which as a connecting thread the whole experience of his life, the whole result of his studies, was to cluster in imperishable crystals. The corner-stone of his system was the Freedom of the Will, (in other words, the right of private judgment,) which Beatrice calls the "noble virtue." * As to every man is offered his choice between good and evil, and as, even upon the root of a nature originally a habit of

* *Purgatorio*, XVIII. 73. He defines it in the *De Monarchia* (L. I. § 14). Among other things he calls it "the first beginning of our liberty." *Paradiso* V. 19, 20, he calls it "the greatest gift that in his largess God creating made." "Dico quod judicium medium est apprehensionis et appetitus." — (*De Monarchia*, ubi *supra*.)

"Right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides."

Troilus and Cressida.

virtue may be engrafted,* no man is excused. "All hope abandon ye who enter in," for they have thrown away reason which is the good of the intellect, "and it seems to me no less a marvel to bring back to reason him in whom it is wholly spent than to bring back to life him who has been four days in the tomb."† As a guide of the will in civil affairs the Emperor; in spiritual, the Pope.‡ Dante is not one of those reformers who would assume the office of God to "make all things new." He knew the power of tradition and habit, and wished to utilize it for his purpose. He found the Empire and the Papacy already existing, but both needing reformation that they might serve the ends of their original institution. Bad leadership was to blame; men fit to gird on the sword had been turned into priests, and good preachers spoiled to make bad kings.§ The spiritual had usurped to itself the prerogatives of the temporal power.

"Rome, that reformed the world, accustomed was
Two suns to have which one road and the other,
Of God and of the world, made manifest.
One has the other quenched, and to the crosier
The sword is joined, and ill beseemeth it,

Because, being joined one feareth not the other."||

Both powers held their authority directly from God, "not so, however, that the Roman Prince is not in some things subject to the Roman Pontiff, since that human felicity [to be attained only by peace, justice, and good government, possible only under a single ruler] is in some sort ordained to the end of immortal felicity. Let Cæsar use that reverence toward Peter which a first-born son ought to use toward a father; that, shone upon by the light of paternal grace, he may more powerfully illumine the orb of earth over which he is set by him alone

* *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 22.

† *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 7. "Qui descenderit ad inferos, non ascendet."—Job vii. 9.

‡ But it may be inferred that he put the interests of mankind above both. "For citizens," he says, "exist not for the sake of consuls, nor the people for the sake of the king, but, on the contrary, consuls for the sake of citizens, and the king for the sake of the people."

§ *Paradiso*, VIII. 145, 146.

|| *Purgatorio*, XVI. 106–112.

who is the ruler of all things spiritual and temporal.”* As to the fatal gift of Constantine, Dante demonstrates that an Emperor could not alienate what he held only in trust; but if he made the gift, the Pope should hold it as a feudatory of the Empire, for the benefit, however, of Christ’s poor.† Dante is always careful to distinguish between the Papacy and the Pope. He prophesies for Boniface VIII. a place in hell,‡ but acknowledges him as the Vicar of Christ, goes so far even as to denounce the outrage of Guillaume de Nogaret at Anagni as done to the Saviour himself.§ But in the Spiritual World Dante acknowledges no such supremacy, and, when he would have fallen on his knees before Adrian V., is rebuked by him in a quotation from the Apocalypse: —

“Err not, fellow-servant am I
With thee and with the others to one power.”||

So impartial was this man whose great work is so often represented as a kind of bag in which he secreted the gall of personal prejudice, so truly Catholic is he, that both parties find their arsenal in him. The Romanist proves his soundness in doctrine, the anti-Romanist claims him as the first Protestant; the Mazzinist and the Imperialist can alike quote him for their purpose. Dante’s ardent conviction would not let him see that both Church and Empire were on the wane. If an ugly suspicion of this would force itself upon him, perhaps he only clung to both the more tenaciously. But he was no blind theorist. He would reform the Church through the Church, and is less anxious for Italian independence than for Italian good government under an Emperor from Germany rather than from Utopia.

The Papacy was a necessary part of Dante’s system, as a supplement to the Empire, which we strongly incline to believe

* *De Monarchia*, § ult.

† *De Monarchia*, L. III. § 10. “Poterat tamen Inferator in patrocinium Ecclesiæ patrimonium et alia deputare immoto semper superiori dominio cujus unitas divisio non patitur. Poterat et Vicarius Dei recipere, non tanquam possessor, sed tanquam fructuum pro Ecclesia proque Christi pauperibus dispensator.” He tells us that St. Dominic did not ask for the tithes which belong to the poor of God. (*Paradiso*, XII. 93, 94.) “Let them return whence they came,” he says (*De Monarchia*, L. II. § 10); “they came well, let them return ill, for they were well given and ill held.”

‡ *Inferno*, XIX. 53; *Paradiso*, XXX. 145 – 148.

§ *Purgatorio*, XX. 86 – 92.

|| *Purgatorio*, XIX. 134, 135.

was always foremost in his mind. In a passage already quoted, he says that "the soil where Rome sits is worthy beyond what men preach and admit," that is, as the birthplace of the Empire. Both in the *Convito* and the *De Monarchia* he affirms that the course of Roman history was providentially guided from the first. Rome was founded in the same year that brought into the world David, ancestor of the Redeemer after the flesh. St. Augustine said that "God showed in the most opulent and illustrious Empire of the Romans how much the civil virtues might avail even without true religion, that it might be understood how, this added, men became citizens of another city whose king is truth, whose law charity, and whose measure eternity." Dante goes further than this. He makes the Romans as well as the Jews a chosen people, the one as founders of civil society, the other as depositaries of the true faith.* One side of Dante's mind was so practical and positive, and his pride in the Romans so intense,† that he sometimes seems to regard their mission as the higher of the two. Without peace, which only good government could give, mankind could not arrive at the highest virtue, whether of the active or contemplative life. "And since what is true of the part is true of the whole, and it happens in the particular man that by sitting quietly he is perfected in prudence and wisdom, it is clear that the human race in the quiet or tranquillity of peace is most freely and easily disposed for his proper work which is almost divine, as it is written, 'Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels.'‡ Whence it is manifest that universal peace is the best of those things which are ordained for our

* This results from the whole course of his argument in the second book of *De Monarchia*, and in the VI. *Paradiso* he calls the Roman eagle "the bird of God" and "the scutcheon of God." We must remember that with Dante God is always the "Emperor of Heaven," the barons of whose court are the apostles. (*Paradiso*, XXIV. 115; *Ib.*, XXV. 17.)

† Dante seems to imply (though his name be German) that he was of Roman descent. He makes the original inhabitants of Florence (*Inferno*, XV. 77, 78) of Roman seed; and Cacciaguیدا, when asked by him about his ancestry, makes no more definite answer than that their dwelling was in the most ancient part of the city. (*Paradiso*, XVI. 40.)

‡ Man was created, according to Dante (*Convito*, Tr. II. c. 6), to supply the place of the fallen angels, and is in a sense superior to the angels, inasmuch as he has reason, which they do not need.

sense of the worth of freedom, whether in thought or government. He represents, indeed, the very object of his journey through the triple realm of shades as a search after liberty.* But it must not be that scramble after undefined and indefinable rights which ends always in despotism, equally degrading, whether crowned with a red cap or an imperial diadem. His theory of liberty has for its corner-stone the Freedom of the Will, and the will is free only when the judgment wholly controls the appetite.† On such a base even a democracy may rest secure, and on such alone.

Rome was always the central point of Dante's speculation. A shadow of her old sovereignty was still left her in the primacy of the Church, to which unity of faith was essential. He accordingly has no sympathy with heretics of whatever kind. He puts the ex-troubadour Bishop of Marseilles, chief instigator of the horrors of Provence, in paradise.‡ The Church is infallible in spiritual matters, but this is an affair of outward discipline merely, and means the Church as a form of polity. Unity was Dante's leading doctrine, and therefore he puts Mahomet among the schismatics, not because he divided the Church, but the faith.§ Dante's Church was of this world, but he surely believed in another and spiritual one. It has been questioned whether he was orthodox or not. There can be no doubt of it so far as outward assent and conformity are concerned, which he would practise himself and enforce upon others as the first postulate of order, the prerequisite for all happiness in this life. In regard to the Visible Church he was a reformer, but no revolutionist; it is sheer ignorance to speak of him as if there were anything new or exceptional in his denunciation of the corruptions of the clergy. They were the commonplaces of the age, nor were they confined to laymen.|| To the absolute authority of the Church Dante admitted some exceptions. He denies that the supreme Pontiff has the unlimited power of binding and loosing claimed for him. "Other-

* *Purgatorio*, I. 71.

† *De Monarchia*, L. I. § 14.

‡ *Paradiso*, IX.

§ *Inferno*, XXXVIII.; *Purgatorio*, XXXII.

|| See the poems of Walter Mapes (who was Archdeacon of Oxford); the *Bible Guiot*, and the *Bible au Seigneur de Berze*, Barbazan and Méon, II.

wise he might absolve me impenitent, which God himself could not do."*

"By malison of theirs is not so lost
Eternal Love that it cannot return."†

Nor does the sacredness of the office extend to him who chances to hold it. Philip the Fair himself could hardly treat Boniface VIII. worse than he. With wonderful audacity, he declares the Papal throne vacant by the mouth of Saint Peter himself.‡ Even if his theory of a dual government were not in question, Dante must have been very cautious in meddling with the Church. It was not an age that stood much upon ceremony. He himself tells us he had seen men burned alive, and the author of the *Ottimo Comento* says: "I the writer saw followers of his [Fra Dolcino] burned at Padua to the number of twenty-two together."§ Clearly, in such a time as this, one must not make "the veil of the mysterious verse" too thin.||

In the affairs of this life Dante was, as we have said, supremely practical, and he makes prudence the chief of the cardinal virtues.¶ He has made up his mind to take things as they come, and to do at Rome as the Romans do.

"Ah, savage company! but in the Church
With saints, and in the tavern with the gluttons!"**

In the world of thought it was otherwise, and here Dante's doctrine, if not precisely esoteric, was certainly not that of his day, and must be gathered from hints rather than direct statements. The general notion of God was still (perhaps is largely even now) of a provincial, one might almost say a denominational, Deity. The popular poets always represent Macon, Apolin, Tervagant, and the rest as quasi-deities unable to resist the superior strength of the Christian God. The Paynim answers the arguments of his would-be converters with the taunt that he would never worship a divinity who could not save himself from being done ignominiously to death. Dante

* *De Monarchia*, L. III. § 8.

† *Purgatorio*, III. 133, 134.

‡ *Paradiso*, XXVII. 22.

§ *Purgatorio*, XXVII. 18; *Ottimo Inferno*, XXVIII. 55.

|| *Inferno*, IX. 63; *Purgatorio*, VIII. 20.

¶ *Purgatorio*, XXIX. 131, 132.

** *Inferno*, XXII. 13, 14.

evidently was not satisfied with the narrow conception which limits the interest of the Deity to the affairs of Jews and Christians. That saying of Saint Paul, "Whom, therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you," had perhaps influenced him, but his belief in the divine mission of the Roman people probably was conclusive. "The Roman Empire had the help of miracles in perfecting itself," he says, and then enumerates some of them. The first is that "under Numa Pompilius, the second king of the Romans, when he was sacrificing according to the rite of the Gentiles, a shield fell from heaven into the city chosen of God."* In the *Convito*, we find "Virgil, speaking in the person of God," and Æacus "wisely having recourse to God," the god being Jupiter. † Ephialtes is punished in hell for rebellion against "the Supreme Jove," ‡ and, that there may be no misunderstanding, Dante invokes the

"Jove Supreme,
Who upon earth for us wast crucified."§

It is noticeable also that Dante, with evident design, constantly alternates examples drawn from Christian and Pagan tradition or mythology. || He had conceived a unity in the human race, all of whose branches had worshipped the same God under divers names and aspects, had arrived at the same truth by different roads. We cannot understand a passage in the twenty-sixth *Paradiso*, where Dante inquires of Adam concerning the names of God, except as a hint that the Chosen People had done in this thing even as the Gentiles did. ¶ It is true that he puts all Pagans in Limbo, "where without hope they live in longing," and that he makes baptism essential to salvation.** But

* *De Monarchia*, L. II. § 4.

† *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 4; *Ib.* c. 27; *Æneid*, I. 178, 179; Ovid's *Met.* VII.

‡ *Inferno*, XXXI. 92.

§ *Purgatorio*, VI. 118, 119. Pulci, not understanding, has parodied this. (*Morgante*, Canto II. st. 1.)

|| See, for example, *Purgatorio*, XX. 100-117.

¶ We believe that Dante, though he did not understand Greek, knew something of Hebrew. He would have been like to study it as the sacred language, and opportunities of profiting by the help of learned Jews could not have been wanting to him in his wanderings. In the above-cited passage some of the best texts read *I s' appellava*, and others *Un s' appellava*. God was called I (the *Je* in *Jehovah*) or *One*, and afterwards *El*, — the strong, — an epithet given to many gods. Whichever reading we adopt, the meaning and the inference from it are the same.

** *Inferno*, IV.

it is noticeable that his Limbo is the Elysium of Virgil, and that he particularizes Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, David, and others as prisoners there with the rest till the descent of Christ into hell.* But were they altogether without hope? and did baptism mean an immersion of the body or a purification of the soul? The state of the heathen after death had evidently been to Dante one of those doubts that spring up at the foot of every truth. In the *De Monarchia* he says: "There are some judgments of God to which, though human reason cannot attain by its own strength, yet is it lifted to them by the help of faith and of those things which are said to us in Holy Writ, — as to this, that no one, however perfect in the moral and intellectual virtues both as a habit [of the mind] and in practice, can be saved without faith, it being granted that he shall never have heard anything concerning Christ; for the unaided reason of man cannot look upon this as just; nevertheless, with the help of faith, it can."† But faith, it should seem, was long in lifting Dante to this height; for in the nineteenth canto of the *Paradiso*, which must have been written many years after the passage just cited, the doubt recurs again, and we are told that it was "a cavern," concerning which he had "made frequent questioning." The answer is given here: —

"Truly to him who with me subtilizes,
If so the Scripture were not over you,
For doubting there were marvellous occasion."

But what Scripture? Dante seems cautious, tells us that the eternal judgments are above our comprehension, postpones the answer, and when it comes, puts an orthodox prophylactic before it: —

"Unto this kingdom never
Ascended one who had not faith in Christ
Before or since he to the tree was nailed.
But look thou, many crying are, 'Christ, Christ!'
Who at the judgment shall be far less near
To him than some shall be who knew not Christ."

There is, then, some hope for the man born on the bank of Indus who has never heard of Christ? Dante is still cautious, but answers the question indirectly in the next canto by putting the Trojan Ripheus among the blessed: —

* Dante's *Limbo*, of course, is the *Limbus Patrum*.

† *De Monarchia*, L. II. § 8.

“ Who would believe, down in the errant world,
 That e'er the Trojan Ripheus in this round
 Could be the fifth one of these holy lights ?
 Now knoweth he enough of what the world
 Has not the power to see of grace divine,
 Although *his* sight may not discern the bottom.”

Then he seems to hesitate again, brings in the Church legend of Trajan brought back to life by the prayers of Gregory the Great that he might be converted ; and after an interval of fifty lines tells us how Ripheus was saved : —

“ The other one, through grace that from so deep
 A fountain wells that never hath the eye
 Of any creature reached its primal wave,
 Set all his love below on righteousness ;
 Wherefore from grace to grace did God unclothe
 His eye to our redemption yet to be,
 Whence he believed therein, and suffered not
 From that day forth the stench of Paganism,
 And he reproved therefor the folk perverse.
 Those maidens three, whom at the right-hand wheel *
 Thou didst behold, were unto him for baptism
 More than a thousand years before baptizing.”

If the reader recall a passage already quoted from the *Convito*,† he will perhaps think with us that the gate of Dante's *Limbo* is left ajar even for the ancient philosophers to slip out. The divine judgments are still inscrutable, and the ways of God past finding out, but faith would seem to have led Dante at last to a more merciful solution of his doubt than he had reached when he wrote the *De Monarchia*. It is always humanizing to see how the most rigid creed is made to bend before the kindlier instincts of the heart. The stern Dante thinks none beyond hope save those who are dead in sin and have made evil their good. But we are by no means sure that he is not right in insisting rather on the implacable severity of the law than on the possible relenting of the judge. Exact justice is commonly more merciful in the long run than pity, for it tends to foster in men those stronger qualities which make them good citizens, an object second only with the Roman-minded Dante

* Faith, Hope, and Charity. (*Purgatorio*, XXIX. 121.) Mr. Longfellow has translated the last verse literally. The meaning is,

“ More than a thousand years ere baptism was.”

† In which the *celestial Athens* is mentioned.

to that of making them spiritually regenerate, nay, perhaps even more important as a necessary preliminary to it. The inscription over the gate of hell tells us that the terms on which we receive the trust of life were fixed by the Divine Power (which can what it wills), and are therefore unchangeable, by the Highest Wisdom, and therefore for our truest good, by the Primal Love, and therefore the kindest. These are the three attributes of that justice which moved the maker of them. Dante is no harsher than experience, which always exacts the uttermost farthing; no more inexorable than conscience, which never forgives nor forgets. No teaching is truer or more continually needful than that the stains of the soul are ineffaceable, and that though their growth may be arrested, their nature is to spread insidiously till they have brought all to their own color. Evil is a far more cunning and persevering propagandist than Good, for it has no inward strength, and is driven to seek countenance and sympathy. It must have company, for it cannot bear to be alone in the dark, while

“Virtue can see to do what Virtue would
By her own radiant light.”

There is one other point which we will dwell on for a moment as bearing on the question of Dante's orthodoxy. His nature was one in which, as in Swedenborg's, a clear practical understanding was continually streamed over by the northern lights of mysticism, through which the familiar stars shine with a softened and more spiritual lustre. Nothing is more interesting than the way in which the two qualities of his mind alternate, and indeed play into each other, tinging his matter-of-fact sometimes with unexpected glows of fancy, sometimes giving an almost geometrical precision to his most mystical visions. In his letter to Can Grande he says: “It behooves not those to whom it is given to know what is best in us to follow the footprints of the herd; much rather are they bound to oppose its wanderings. For the vigorous in intellect and reason, endowed with a certain divine liberty, are constrained by no customs. Nor is it wonderful, since they are not governed by the laws, but much more govern the laws themselves.” It is not impossible that Dante, whose love of

knowledge was all-embracing, may have got some hint of the doctrine of the Oriental Sufis. With them the first and lowest of the steps that lead upward to perfection is the law, a strict observance of which is all that is expected of the ordinary man whose mind is not open to the conception of a higher virtue and holiness. But the Sufi puts himself under the guidance of some holy man [Virgil in the *Inferno*], whose teaching he receives implicitly, and so arrives at the second step, which is the Path [*Purgatorio*] by which he reaches a point where he is freed from all outward ceremonials and observances, and has risen from an outward to a spiritual worship. The third step is Knowledge [*Paradiso*], endowed by which with supernatural insight, he becomes like the angels about the throne, and has but one farther step to take before he reaches the goal and becomes one with God. The analogies of this system with Dante's are obvious and striking. They become still more so when Virgil takes leave of him at the entrance of the Terrestrial Paradise with the words : —

“ Expect no more a word or sign from me ;
 Free and upright and sound is thy free-will,
 And error were it not to do its bidding ;
 Thee o'er thyself I therefore crown and mitre,”*

that is, “ I make thee king and bishop over thyself ; the inward light is to be thy law in things both temporal and spiritual.” The originality of Dante consists in his not allowing any divorce between the intellect and the soul in its highest sense, in his making reason and intuition work together to the same end of spiritual perfection. The unsatisfactoriness of science leads Faust to seek repose in worldly pleasure ; it led Dante to find it in faith, of whose efficacy the short-coming of all logical substitutes for it was the most convincing argument. That we cannot know, is to him a proof that there is some higher plane on which we can believe and see. Dante had discovered the incalculable worth of a single idea as compared with the largest heap of facts ever gathered. To a man more interested in the soul of things than in the body of them, the little finger of Plato is thicker than the loins of Aristotle.

We cannot but think that there is something like a fallacy in

* *Purgatorio*, XXVII. 139 - 142.

Mr. Buckle's theory that the advance of mankind is necessarily in the direction of science, and not in that of morals. No doubt the laws of morals existed from the beginning, but so also did those of science, and it is by the application, not the mere recognition, of both that the race is benefited. No one questions how much science has done for our physical comfort and convenience, and with the mass of men these perhaps must of necessity precede the quickening of their moral instincts; but such material gains are illusory, unless they go hand in hand with a corresponding ethical advance. The man who gives his life for a principle has done more for his kind than he who discovers a new metal or names a new gas, for the great motors of the race are moral, not intellectual, and their force lies ready to the use of the poorest and weakest of us all. We accept a truth of science so soon as it is demonstrated, are perfectly willing to take it on authority, can appropriate whatever use there may be in it without the least understanding of its processes, as men send messages by the electric telegraph, but every truth of morals must be redemonstrated in the experience of the individual man before he is capable of utilizing it as a constituent of character or a guide in action. A man does not receive the statements that "two and two make four," and that "the pure in heart shall see God," on the same terms. The one can be proved to him with four grains of corn; he can never arrive at a belief in the other till he realize it in the intimate persuasion of his whole being. This is typified in the mystery of the incarnation. The divine reason must forever manifest itself anew in the lives of men, and that as individuals. This atonement with God, this identification of the man with the truth,* so that right action shall not result from the lower reason of utility, but from the higher of a will so purified of self as to sympathize by instinct with the eternal laws,† is not something that can be done once for all, that can become historic and traditional, a dead flower

* "I conceived myself to be now," says Milton, "not as mine own person, but as a member incorporate into that truth whereof I was persuaded."

† "But now was turning my desire and will,
Even as a wheel that equally is moved,
The Love that moves the sun and other stars."

(*Paradiso*, XXXIII., closing verses of the *Divina Commedia*.)

pressed between the leaves of the family Bible, but must be renewed in every generation, and in the soul of every man that it may be valid. Certain sects show their recognition of this in what are called revivals, a gross and carnal attempt to apply truth, as it were, mechanically, and to accomplish by the etherization of excitement and the magnetism of crowds what is possible only in the solitary exaltations of the soul. This is the high moral of Dante's poem. We have likened it to a Christian basilica; and as in that so there is here also, painted or carven, every image of beauty and holiness the artist's mind could conceive for the adornment of the holy place. We may linger to enjoy these if we will, but if we follow the central thought that runs like the nave from entrance to choir, it leads us to an image of the divine made human, to teach us how the human might also make itself divine. Dante beholds at last an image of that Power, Love, and Wisdom, one in essence, but trine in manifestation, to answer the needs of our triple nature and satisfy the senses, the heart, and the mind.

"Within the deep and luminous subsistence
Of the High Light appeared to me three circles
Of threefold color and of one dimension,
And by the second seemed the first reflected
As iris is by iris, and the third
Seemed fire that equally by both is breathed.

Within itself, of its own very color,
Seemed to me painted with our effigy,
Wherefore my sight was all absorbed therein."

He had reached the high altar where the miracle of transubstantiation is wrought, itself also a type of the great conversion that may be accomplished in our own nature (the lower thing assuming the qualities of the higher), not by any process of reason, but by the very fire of the divine love.

"Then there smote my mind
A flash of lighting wherein came its wish."*

* Dante seems to allude directly to this article of the Catholic faith when he says, on entering the Celestial Paradise, "to signify transhumanizing by words could not be done," and questions whether he was there in the renewed spirit only or in the flesh also:—

"If I was merely *what of me thou newly*
Created'st, Love who governest the heavens,
Thou knowest who didst lift me with thy light."—*Paradiso*, I. 70–75.

Perhaps it seems little to say that Dante was the first great poet who ever made a poem wholly out of himself, but, rightly looked at, it implies a wonderful self-reliance and originality in his genius. His is the first keel that ever ventured into the silent sea of human consciousness to find a new world of poetry.

“L’acqua ch’io prendo giammai non si corse.”*

He discovered that not only the story of some heroic person, but that of any man might be epical; that the way to heaven was not outside the world but through it. Living at a time when the end of the world was still looked for as imminent,† he believed that the second coming of the Lord was to take place on no more conspicuous stage than the soul of man; that his kingdom would be established in the surrendered will. A poem, the precious distillation of such a character and such a life as his through all those sorrowing but undespondent years, must have a meaning in it which few men have meaning enough in themselves wholly to penetrate. That its allegorical form belongs to a past fashion, with which the modern mind has little sympathy, we should no more think of denying than of whitewashing a fresco of Giotto. But we may take it as we may nature, which is also full of double meanings, either as picture or as parable, either for the simple delight of its beauty or as a shadow of the spiritual world. We may take it as we may history, either for its picturesqueness or its moral, either for the variety of its figures, or as a witness to that perpetual presence of God in his creation of which Dante was so profoundly sensible. He had seen and suffered much, but it is only to the man who is himself of value that experience is valuable. He had not looked on man and nature as most of us do, with less interest than into the columns of our daily newspaper. He saw in them the latest authentic news of the God who made them, for he carried everywhere that vision washed clear with tears which detects the meaning under the mask, and, beneath the casual and transitory, the eternal keeping

* *Paradiso*, II. 7. Lucretius makes the same boast:—

“Avia Pieridum peragro loca nullius ante
Trita solo.”

† *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 15.

its sleepless watch. The secret of Dante's power is not far to seek. Whoever can express *himself* with the full force of unconscious sincerity will be found to have uttered something ideal and universal. Dante intended a didactic poem, but the most picturesque of poets could not escape his genius, and his sermon sings and glows and charms in a manner that surprises more at the fiftieth reading than the first, such variety of freshness is in imagination.

There are no doubt in the *Divina Commedia* (regarded merely as poetry) sandy spaces enough both of physics and metaphysics, but with every deduction Dante remains the first of descriptive as well as moral poets. His verse is as various as the feeling it conveys; now it has the terseness and edge of steel, and now palpitates with iridescent softness like the breast of a dove. In vividness he is without a rival. He drags back by its tangled locks the unwilling head of some petty traitor of an Italian provincial town, lets the fire glare on the sullen face for a moment, and it sears itself into the memory forever. He shows us an angel glowing with that love of God which makes him a star even amid the glory of heaven, and the holy shape keeps lifelong watch in our fantasy constant as a sentinel. He has the skill of conveying impressions indirectly. In the gloom of hell his bodily presence is revealed by his stirring something, on the mount of expiation by casting a shadow. Would he have us feel the brightness of an angel? He makes him whiten afar through the smoke like a dawn,* or, walking straight toward the setting sun, he finds his eyes suddenly unable to withstand a greater splendor against which his hand is unavailing to shield him. Even its reflected light, then, is brighter than the direct ray of the sun.† And how much more keenly do we feel the parched lips of Master Adam for those rivulets of the Casentino which run down into the Arno, "making their channels cool and soft!" His comparisons are as fresh, as simple, and as directly from nature as those of Homer.‡

* *Purgatorio*, XVI. 142. Here is Milton's "Far off his coming shone."

† *Purgatorio*, XV. 7, *seqq.*

‡ See, for example, *Inferno*, XVII. 127 - 132; *Ib.*, XXIV. 7 - 12; *Purgatorio*, II. 124 - 129; *Ib.*, III. 79 - 84; *Ib.*, XXVII. 76 - 81; *Paradiso*, XIX. 91 - 93; *Ib.*, XXI. 34 - 39; *Ib.*, XXIII. 1 - 9.

Sometimes they show a more subtle observation, as where he compares the stooping of Antæus over him to the leaning tower of Garisenda, to which the clouds, flying in an opposite direction to its inclination, give away their motion.* His suggestions of individuality, too, from attitude or speech, as in Farinata, Sordello, or Pia,† give in a hint what is worth acres of so-called character-painting. In straightforward pathos, the single and sufficient thrust of phrase, he has no competitor. He is too sternly touched to be effusive and tearful :

“Io non piangeva, sì dentro impietrai.”‡

His is always the true coin of speech,

“Sì lucida e sì tonda
Che nel suo conio nulla ci s' inforsa,”

and never the highly ornamented promise to pay, token of insolvency.

No doubt it is primarily by his poetic qualities that a poet must be judged, for it is by these, if by anything, that he is to maintain his place in literature. And he must be judged by them absolutely, with reference, that is, to the highest standard, and not relatively to the fashions and opportunities of the age in which he lived. Yet these considerations must fairly enter into our decision of another side of the question, and one that has much to do with the true quality of the man, with his character as distinguished from his talent, and therefore with how much he will influence men as well as delight them. We may reckon up pretty exactly a man's advantages and defects as an artist ; these he has in common with others, and they are to be measured by a recognized standard ; but there is something in his *genius* that is incalculable. It would be hard to define the causes of the difference of impression made upon us respectively by two such men as Æschylus and Euripides,

* *Inferno*, XXXI. 136 – 138.

“And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,

That give away their motion to the stars.” (Coleridge, “Dejection, an Ode.”)

See also the comparison of the dimness of the faces seen around him in Paradise to “a pearl on a white forehead.” (*Paradiso*, III. 14.)

† *Inferno*, X. 35, 41 ; *Purgatorio*, VI. 61 – 66 ; *Ib.*, V. 133..

‡ For example, Cavalcanti's *Come dicesti egli ebbe?* (*Inferno*, X. 67, 68.) Anselmuccio's *Tu guardi sì, padre, che hai?* (*Inferno*, XXXIII. 51.)

but we feel profoundly that the latter, though in some respects a better dramatist, was an infinitely lighter weight. Æschylus stirs something in us far deeper than the sources of mere pleasurable excitement. The man behind the verse is far greater than the verse itself, and the impulse he gives to what is deepest and most sacred in us, though we cannot always explain it, is none the less real and lasting. Some men always seem to remain outside their work; others make their individuality felt in every part of it; their very life vibrates in every verse, and we do not wonder that it has "made them lean for many years." The virtue that has gone out of them abides in what they do. The book such a man makes is indeed, as Milton called it, "the precious lifeblood of a master spirit." Theirs is a true immortality, for it is they, and not their talent, that survives in their work. Dante's concise forthrightness of phrase, which, to that of most other poets is as a stab* to a blow with a cudgel, the vigor of his thought, the beauty of his images, the refinement of his conception of spiritual things, are marvellous if we compare him with his age and its best achievement. But it is for his power of inspiring and sustaining, it is because they find in him a spur to noble aims, a secure refuge in that defeat which the present always seems, that they prize Dante who know and love him best. He is not merely a great poet, but an influence, part of the Soul's resources in time of trouble. From him she learns that, "married to the truth she is a mistress, but otherwise a slave shut out of all liberty." †

All great poets have their message to deliver us, from something higher than they. We venture on no unworthy comparison between him who reveals to us the beauty of this world's love and the grandeur of this world's passion and him who shows that love of God is the fruit whereof all other loves are but the beautiful and fleeting blossom, that the passions are yet sublimer objects of contemplation, when, subdued by the will, they become patience in suffering and perseverance in the upward path. But we cannot help thinking that if Shakespeare

* To the "bestiality" of certain arguments Dante says, "one would wish to reply, not with words, but with a knife." (*Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 14.)

† *Convito*, Tr. IV. c. 2.

be the most comprehensive intellect, so Dante is the highest spiritual nature that has expressed itself in rhythmical form. Had he merely made us feel how petty the ambitions, sorrows, and vexations of earth appear when looked down on from the heights of our own character and the seclusion of our own genius, or from the region where we commune with God, he had done much :

“ I with my sight returned through one and all
The sevenfold spheres, and I beheld this globe
Such that I smiled at its ignoble semblance.” *

But he has done far more ; he has shown us the way by which that country far beyond the stars may be reached, may become the habitual dwelling-place and fortress of our nature, instead of being the object of its vague aspiration in moments of indolence. At the Round Table of King Arthur there was left always one seat empty for him who should accomplish the adventure of the Holy Grail. It was called the perilous seat because of the dangers he must encounter who would win it. In the company of the epic poets there was a place left for whoever should embody the Christian idea of a triumphant life, outwardly all defeat, inwardly victorious, who should make us partakers of that cup of sorrow in which all are communicants with Christ. He who should do this would indeed achieve the perilous seat, for he must combine poesy with doctrine in such cunning wise that the one lose not its beauty nor the other its severity, — and Dante has done it. As he takes possession of it we seem to hear the cry he himself heard when Virgil rejoined the company of great singers,

“ All honor to the loftiest of poets ! ”

* *Paradiso*, XXII. 132-135. *Ib.*, XXVII. 110.